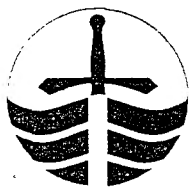


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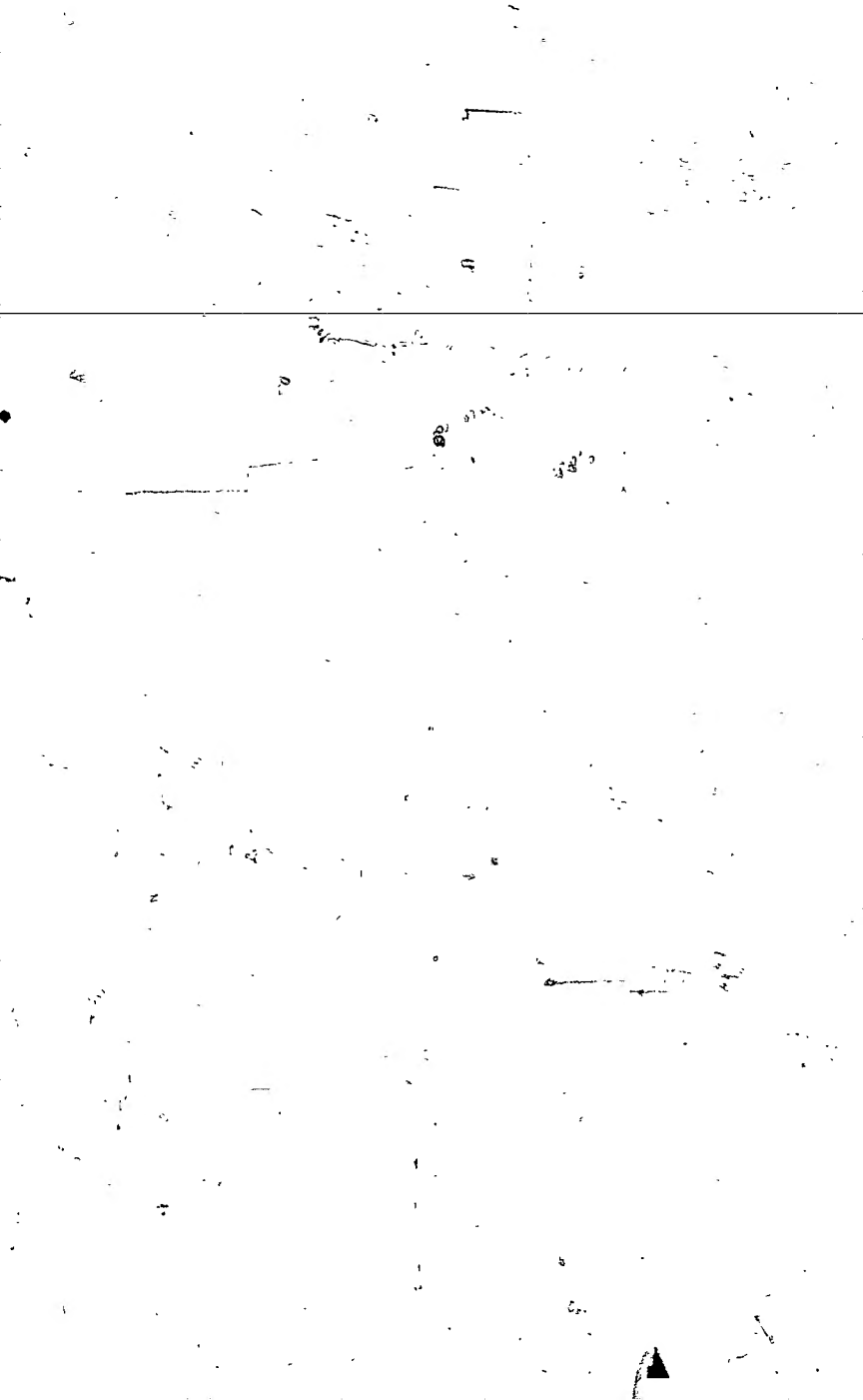


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# Northwest Law

By

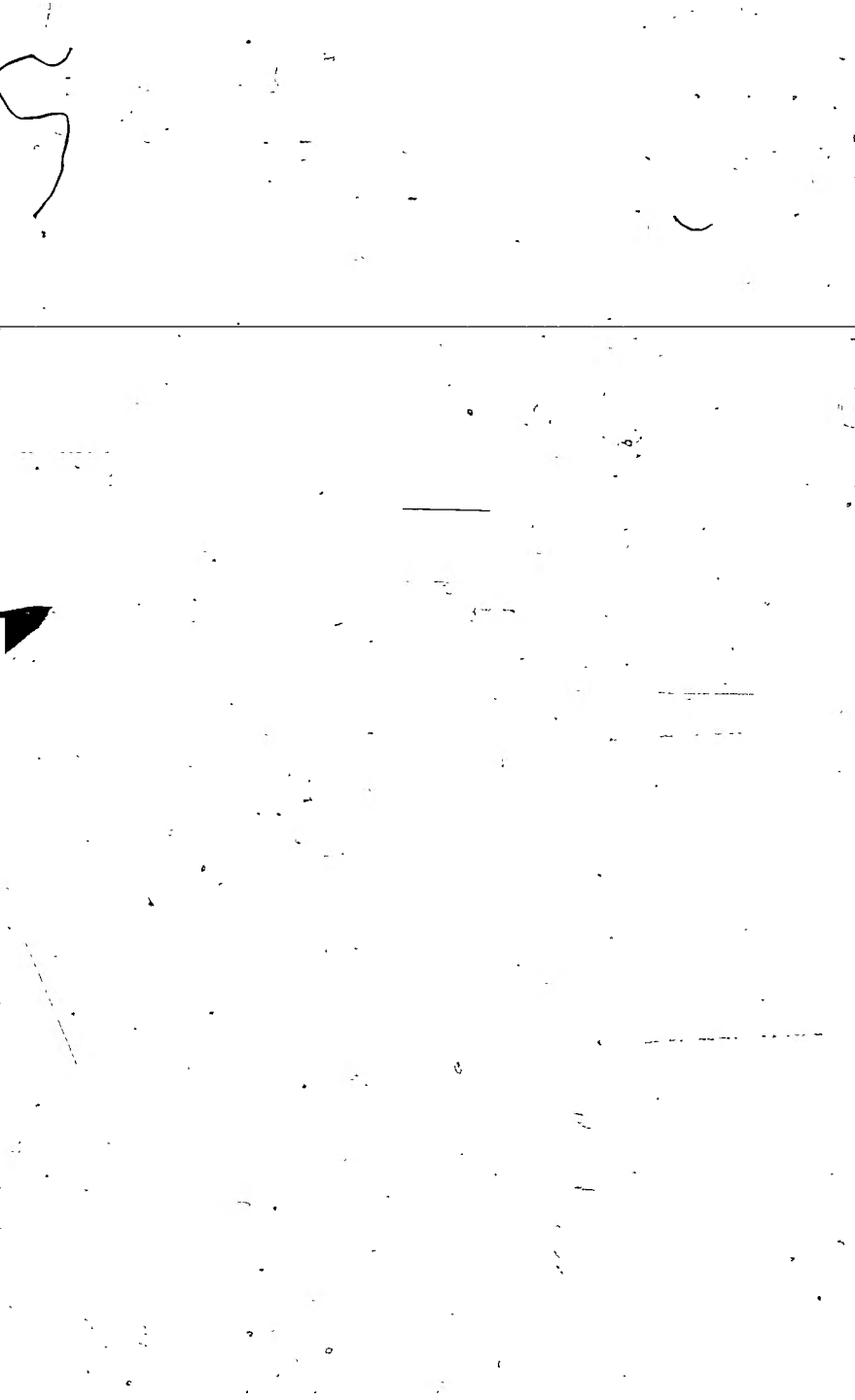
Samuel Alexander White

Author of

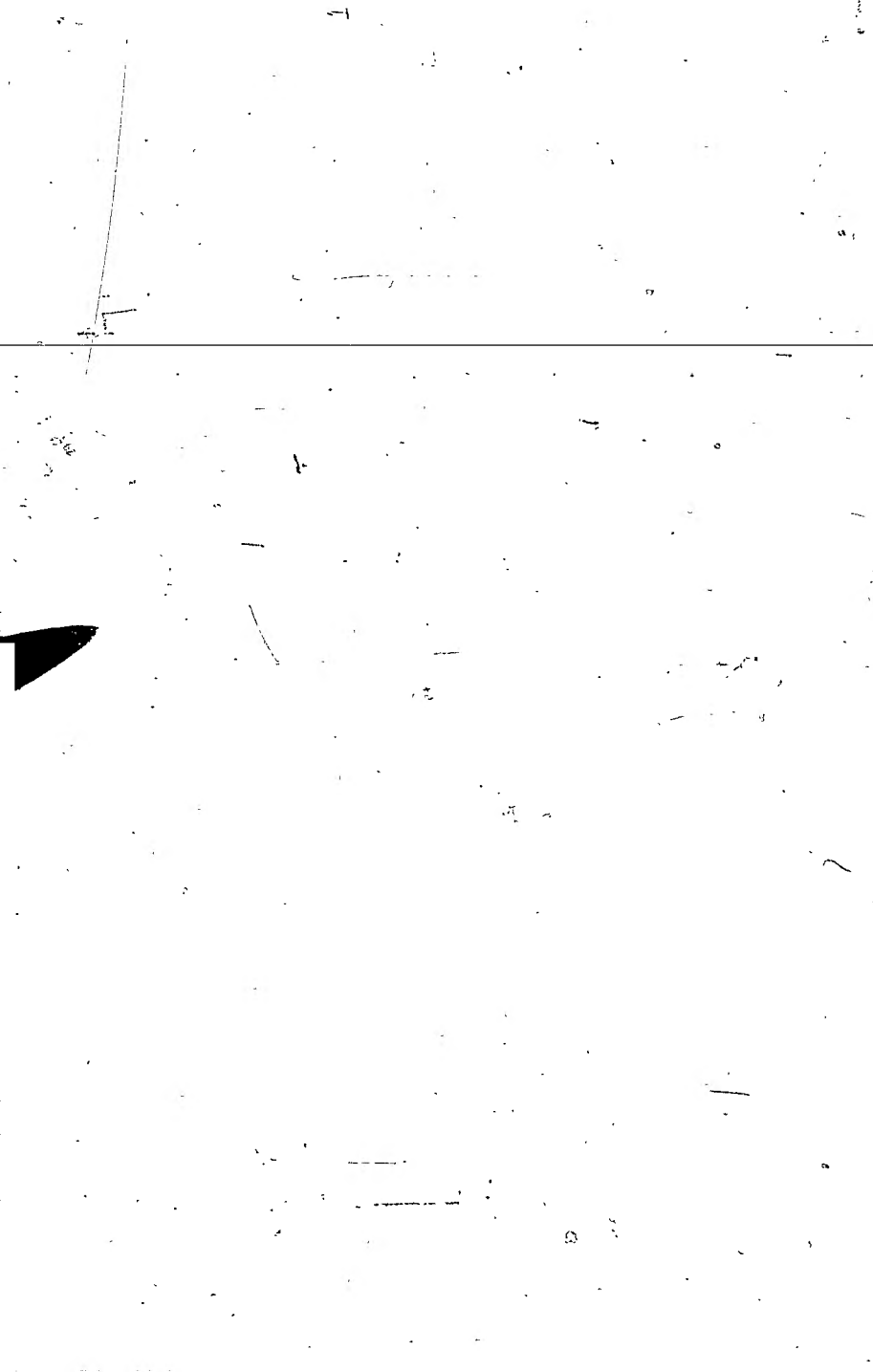
"Northwest Wagons," "North of the  
Border" and "The Code  
of the Northwest"

Mr. White, "the Jack London of Canada," writes one more soul-stirring novel of the historic Northwest territory which he has made his province.

Fact and fiction are welded into one pulse-quickenning whole as Constable Milton Slade of the Royal Northwest Mounted spurs his horse on to the defense of the Three Northwest Torches Ranch, home of the beautiful Muriel Marlow; as he rushes to solve the hold-up of the Great Falls and Canada Railroad; as the intrepid lawman steals a march not only on his colleagues on the force, but on the U. S. sheriff from across the Montana border as well.



*Northwest Law*



# *Northwest Law*

*by*

*Samuel Alexander White*

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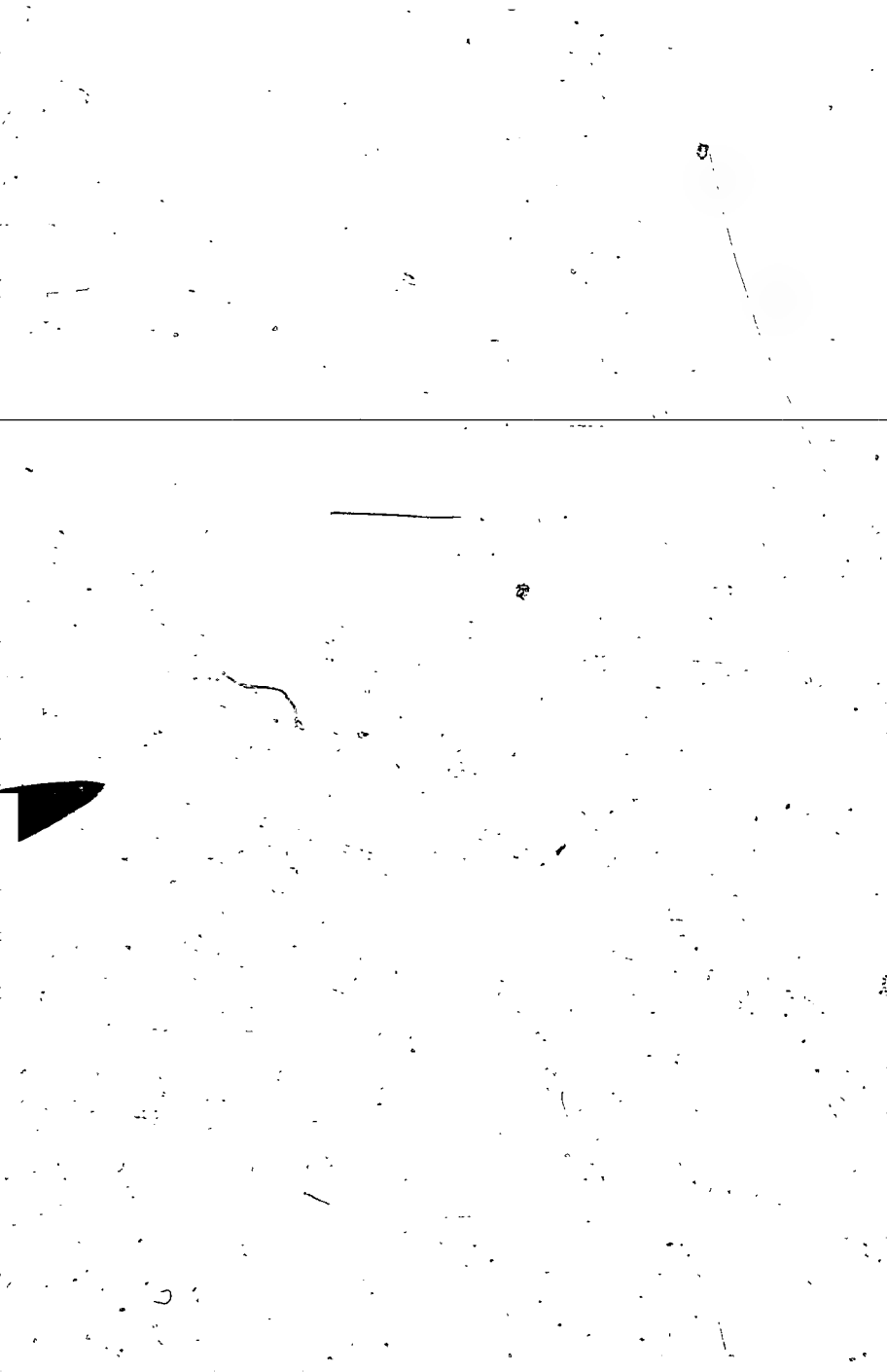
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*Northwest Law*

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## CHAPTER I.

"DARN that gopher!"

Court Baker shot again.

"Missed him three times now," he lamented, taking more careful aim.

Again he tried it with the same result.

"Yeh! Yeh! slippery cuss," he snarled, "slippery as yon Turkey Trail Railway lawyer Rupert Tucker who boss Jack Marlow sets me watching for on our old Three Northwest Torches Ranch."

He made a quick throw-down like the most expert of historic Wild West gun-pointers, but the gopher scrambled away untouched, diving safely into its hole.

"Rupert Tucker I'm naming you, gopher," Court capitulated at the last vanishing hair of the nimble ground dweller, "and maybe I'll get you yet."

The crisp Western discourse that Court Baker, Three Northwest Torches foreman, addressed to the prairie village of striped rodents on the banks of Old Man River, flowing down from its headsprings far up in the Livingstone Range and the High Rock Range, backbone of the Rockies, volleyed on like the reports of his Colts revolvers.

Firing old-timer fashion with both hands, his six-shooters potted gophers right and left, but he was not thinking of gophers merely as gophers while he piled up the furry tails on which the Government of the Northwest Territories had placed a bounty of ten cents a tail.

He was thinking of them as darting, dodging, hiding, burrowing personifications of the slick, smooth, efficient and according to his own and boss Jack Marlow's appraisal—the notoriously crooked solicitor, Rupert Tucker.

Tucker was the eminent counsel for the Turkey Trail Road, the Narrow Gauge from Lethbridge to Dunmore Junction one hundred and ten miles east on the Main Line steel that snaked down from the Kicking Horse Pass through the Canadian open range country just north of the United States border—the Rocky Mountain crossing of the C. P. R.

Somehow Turkey Trail Tucker had managed to attach himself to the C. P. R. also.

There was no steel to the westward of Lethbridge, nothing but the Fort Macleod stage whose driver, Lou Gates, had nicknamed the T. T.

So, with his office headquarters at Calgary now, Tucker was linking up brand-new steel of the fresh branches north and south, the Calgary-Edmonton Branch and the Calgary-Macleod Branch.

The survey of the Macleod end grazed Jack Marlow's ranch house porch.

As lookout man in Marlow's last stand against the railroad gang's coming to complete their line and to drive their spikes in his yard before the Three Northwest Torches Ranch house, against apparently lawful eviction from that open range and homestead, Court Baker had lain out on the river bank all night.

The sunrise over the Ridge Between The Rivers—the Old Man River on one side and the Belly River on the other—made him sleepy and brought out the

gophers to trick his tired eyes.

So, with no C. P. R. men yet in sight, Court was taking pot shots at the spry yellowish-fawn animals to keep himself awake.

To sort of time his lightning trigger-pull, he was singing between kills, and this seemed to cheer his lonesome watch.

Court did not yip and yodel in his song.

He sang like a high-grade artist, a concert performer, only with the vast Western prairie for a platform, his voice pealing full, sweet, strong in the early morning air.

Suddenly the sound of wagon wheels and horses' hoofs echoed warningly amid the reverberations of his pistol claps booming through the hills.

He knocked off abruptly and swung round just in time to deflect his bullets flying wild, and to catch in dark silhouette the Fort Macleod border stage bound out for Lethbridge by way of Three Northwest Torches, headed east and driven by Lou Gates.

Across The Ridge Between The Rivers, Lou was pulling out for the Three Torches Ranch, fairly in the color fountain of the rainbow dawn that blacked his two-span ebony team all the darker and by some strange freak gilded every tire so that he seemed to travel phantom-like on spokeless wheels.

Lou was crook-kneed from endless bracing of his feet against the dash, crook-elbowed from always shoving leather, but his clothes were as gay as the sunrise, yellow corduroy trousers tucked into high, russet boots, blue shirt, red vest, a neck bandana that waved a mile of silver-spotted folds behind the to-

bacco-brown sombrero tilted back on his sandy hair.

His face matched the hues of his costume with many changing lights, blue friendship in his eyes, rosy laughter in his plump cheeks and crinkling nose, flashing white humor in his genial mouth perpetually, joking round ivory rows of good teeth.

Lou's grin widened as from a little distance he sensed the fact that he had caught Court Baker somewhat unaware, and Court gazed more grimly over his smoking guns.

Court was not nearly so clean as Lou, from playing prostrate sentinel in the bunchgrass, his white wool riding chaps all sanded, silver spurs muddied, twenty-dollar tan silk shirt wet with dew, ten-gallon hat hammered flat on top like an inverted plate covering his uncombed tangle of red hair. His brown eyes puckered sleepily and his sunburned nose had a scowl across its bridge that drew the curved nostrils down toward the tuft of fiery mustache edging his stiff upper lip.

Court scowled and growled, but softly, to himself in a voice that was wonderfully musical.

"Heck of a lookout, I am. Too keen on the gun-sights. Never saw Lou Gates's stage till Lou topped Wild Turnip Hill."

"Whoa—consarn you wheelers," he heard the driver fight them.

Lou yelled at him from the high seat.

"Morning, Court."

"Morning, Lou. Your old caboose looks empty. No passengers at all?"

"Nope. Nothing but the mail."

"Aren't you a popular stage driver any more, Lou? Railways going to put you out of business?"

"Too blasted much talk around town in Macleod about trouble breaking on the Three Northwest Torches within three shakes of a dead steer's tail."

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## CHAPTER II.

"Oh! so that's it," crooned Baker. "The Turkey Trail-Three Torches feud well advertised, eh?"

"Yep. Nobody hankering to ride through the ranch today. Philosophers, those town bugs. They say when she clouds up black on the open range and the West wind blows grim grief, it's best to stay in the cyclone cellars."

"Maybe it is if you've got any cellars," Court growled. "All I got is a mattress of bunchgrass and my nose in watery hoofprints."

"Where's your roan horse Soapy, Court? Don't often see you without Soapy."

"Back in the home corral. Soapy's too white to hide well, Lou. It's a heap easier scouting without him. He's worse than an albino elk."

"But what you doing there by night, Court? Admiring the sun-up?"

"Practising, Lou—practising. Looks like we'll need to fan the hammers before long. Boss Jack Marlow is standing pat against the Turkey Trail Railway."

Lou Gates shrugged his humped shoulders humorously.

"Shucks, Court—the North West ain't wild and woolly any more. Take a squint at the new railroads, town sites, Indian reserves and things."

Court Baker pointed east, west, north and south with his empty guns.

"Don't fool yourself, Lou. Don't tell me she's not what she used to be. They're brushing on a bit of

veneer, but varnish is awful quick to scale. The North West Mounted Police have to be right there with the salve so people don't go around showing the scabs."

Court pointed some more with his unwieldy compass needles of blued steel.

"The old hangouts and Mounted posts are still in good working condition," he argued. "Fort Stand Off is just over there on the Belly River yet, isn't it? Fort Whoop Up's over yonder by St. Mary River. Fort Kipp is right handy on the Old Man River. And Fort Macleod keeps on staring across The Slough, winking a shrewd eye at your shiny new Macleod and West Macleod—"

"Yeh! but—" Lou Gates tried to break in.

"Hold on, Lou. I'm not done. There's a Mounted Police post up by Beaver Creek and another back yonder at Pincher Creek, and lots of more creeks I could name all round us. They've penned the Bloods on the Blood Indian Reserve below us a piece, between the St. Mary and the Belly streams. They've penned the Peigans on the Peigan Reserve over the Ridge ahead on the Old Man waters—to sneak off at nights and steal Three Torches horses and butcher Three Torches steers, Yeh!—and our Indians slip over the U. S. border to fight the Crows and the Gros Ventres."

"Well, perhaps it is a bit wild," admitted Lou, "but not so—so merino like."

"Wild enough when the Turkey Trail gang comes to pull our Three Torches ranch house sill logs loose," Court rumbled on. "Seen any of those rail-

road hoboes this morning, Lou?"

Lou nodded, backwards, over the ponderously loaded stage boot which he had taken the opportunity to pile up with freight since he lacked his usual quota of passengers.

"I passed them down yonder a piece, coming on their hand-car full licketty-click, not very far below the old Indian ford," Lou answered in a voice full of gurgles and rolls, like tumbling rapids over round, worn pebbles in a rushing stream bed.

"That gopher Rupert Tucker with them?"

"Yep. Funny how Rupert's so vinegar bitter on Jack Marlow and so sugar sweet on Jack's daughter Muriel — Oh! hold on, Court. I'm plumb sorry I spouted that. I forgot for a minute that you think a heap of Muriel yourself."

"Maybe I do, Lou, but Tucker's crooked."

"A lot of old-timers say that."

"Tucker found a flaw, or made one, in Jack's homestead title when the open range law didn't hold good."

"So I heard the rumors."

"You heard facts, Lou. Tucker wants to shine up to Muriel and all the while fulfill his obligation to and carry out his duty to his newly adopted Canadian Pacific Railway. Two fronts. Two faces. The two don't mix."

"How you feeling about it yourself, Court?" ventured Lou. "That is, personally?"

"This Three Torches last stand is a fight for home, a sick wife and a lovely daughter to Jack Marlow," answered Court solemnly.

"How is Mrs. Marlow? I heard she was bad with her heart."

"She's worse, Lou. The trouble, strain and excitement now and again has been hard on her. She's in bed right now, being kept quiet as possible with that jumpy heart. Aunt Flo Marlow and Muriel are tending her. Couldn't do without Aunt Flo. So you see what kind of fight it is to Jack."

"Yep," nodded Lou seriously, "I sure see."

"But it's more than a homestead fight to me."

"How?" prompted Lou. "Meaning—?"

"It's whatever comes between two men without their hardly knowing each other before," Court explained vaguely. "Between Tucker and me, that is. Antagonism. Rivalry. Hate. Whatever highbrow word's the brand on those feelings. A finish rough-and-tumble, Lou."

Lou inclined his tobacco-brown sombrero understandingly.

"She's a big arena, Court, with the Rockies for ring posts and them looping rivers on the plains, the Belly, the Little Bow, The Big Bow and the Red Deer, for ropes. I don't mind watching the bout from my stage seat as I drive up and down, back and forth. Mebbe, too, you'll be needing some seconds. Only, you got to be mighty careful, you and Jack Marlow, not to do any hitting below the belt—or shooting above. You'd better warn Jack. Rupert Tucker's pulled the Mounted Police into the scrap."

"Tucker has, eh?"

"Yep. Heard when I left town that Constable Milt Slade was ordered out of Stand Off to follow the rail-

road gang, to see that everything stays quiet on the Three Torches survey. That reminds me—"

Lou broke off to loop his reins round his left forearm and stick his whip in the socket.

"That reminds me—I got a railroad letter for Jack."

Lou shifted his mail bags and produced a long, official-looking envelope which he scanned to make sure of the address.

Court Baker studied the mail driver's face doubtfully.

"Maybe the letter's for Muriel," he hazarded.

"Nope—'Jack Marlow,'" Lou read. "'Three Torches Ranch.' Railway letter, all right. Here's the Turkey Trail stationery sign in the upper left-hand corner."

"If it's a Turkey Trail Railway letter, you better get it in to Jack mighty pronto, Lou—before that gang you passed hits the old homestead. Maybe it's a last-minute change of heart on Rupert Tucker's part."

"Maybe," doubted Lou. "You going in, too, Court?"

"Yes, with your news, now I know for sure they're on the prod."

"Lots of passenger room, Court. Where you sitting? Inside? I can move that freight and—"

"Don't move a thing, Lou. I'd sure fall sound asleep in there. I'll sit up front, good and stiff and jolty."

"O. K., Court. Up you come."

Court holstered his guns.

With his foot on the hub he turned back a moment and retrieved his gopher tails.

"Can't throw dimes away now, with people turning you out of house and home," he remarked, commencing to grin.



### CHAPTER III.

"KEEP your eye skinned for Rupert Tucker's hand-car and for that Mounted Constable 'Milt Slade,'" Court adjured. "Looks like a three-cornered race between stage, hand-car and Mountie. If you ask me privately, the stage sure won't be the loser. Shove on your lines, Lou."

Lou swung his four ebonies ahead faster than ever along the trail which followed the high bench of Outpost-Creek and dipped down the steep declivity of Fall-All-Over Hill to the luscious prairie-levels of Three Northwest Torches grazing grass below.

As the stage wheels struck the rapid slant and the breechings pressed into the horses' buttocks, the wheel team bolted madly, tearing down on the leaders and carrying them along in an unexpected runaway that almost caught Lou Gates napping.

A fifty-foot pitch to the gravelled, cobbled creek bank on his nigh side, the soaring slope of the Ridge on his off side, Lou took his choice in a minute.

While the rocking coach rolled toward certain smash-up on the boulders, he braced his crooked knees against the footrail and sawed like lightning with his crooked elbows winging wildly in air.

He cramped the coach violently:

Court Baker felt it tilting and rose to his full height of six feet on the driver's seat, picking out a soft place to jump, but Lou's next heave on the lines jolted him right back into a prone position.

Lou's four-horse team, yanked into a right-angled

Gee-turn, faced up the Ridge so steeply that Court was lying on his back.

Lou slashed them to it, leaders and wheelers both, killing out their runaway momentum on the ascent into the sky.

Winded, he pulled them up at the top, a good many notches above Fall-All-Over Hill.

From their Ridge pinnacle, they stared out suddenly on an immensity of open grazing ground dimming away on all sides, north, south, east, west—rolling far back through the mountain foothills to the Flathead Range gapped above with the North Kootenay and South Kootenay Passes.

Right below them spread the pick of the ranch lands—the Pioneer to the east of Macleod, the Winder Ranch wide afield, the Glengarry in the Porcupine Hills thirty-five miles northward, La Grandeur's on Old Man River, and all the rest lying in a series of beautiful valleys luxuriantly grassed, plentifully watered with mountain-born streams.

As fair a reach as North West eyes ever glimpsed, they gazed on with a surge of admiration in their lightening glance, and fairest of all sparkled Three Torches in the center of the spaciouly flung group.

Netted with a web of silver creeks and greened with unnumbered emerald pasture hills, it shone jewel-like in the early autumn dawn.

The blue clarity of the air in which it posed mirage-like vividly revealed the spotless buildings gleaming chalk-white on the golden-sanded, yellow-clayed cut banks of the Old Man.

Even in that distance, Court and Lou saw quite



clearly the long, low verandahed ranch house with varnished elk horns tacked to the porch wall for pegs to hold garments and accoutrements of the open plains.

They made out just as distinctly the riders' bunk-house facing it.

Beyond, they distinguished the big horse corral sprawled between, dust-mushroomed by its shuttling band of fiery broncs paced by the roan Soapy in their frisky midst.

Their vision took in the branding corral past that, with ropers and branders working in the smoke of three-branding fires.

The first fire burned in the corral itself, heating the branding irons.

The second fire flared out on the home range where the Three Northwest Torches Ranch cook, Peter the Greek, in a white coat as pallid as Soapy's hide, had drawn up his chuck wagon and had commenced cooking breakfast for the shift of cowboys coming off from riding night-herd in charge of Court Baker's top rider, Stafford Wylie.

The third fire smoked still farther away, in the center of the bed ground where Staff Wylie's hands riding round and round in the mysterious fall darkness had held the long-legged, wild-horned range cattle, a stampede-infected breed which Jack Marlow originally had driven north from his M & M, his Marlow-Montana Ranch, driven all the way up from Montana and which he now shagged off in hundreds to the nearest market at Calgary and shipped east on the Main Line steel.

The trio of fires, branding fire, cooking fire, camp fire, appeared commonplace enough to the casual eye, but the strange thing about them was the fact that they never went out.

Night and day, season upon season, year after year those three fires Court and Lou saw had never been totally extinguished.

Now and then one went black, sometimes two, but never three at the same time, and the third always rekindled the other two.

Down to a single ember in the ashes at intervals, nevertheless they would blaze again to cottonwood and willow branches heaped upon each tiny spark.

Something symbolic invested them. Something more than licking poplar flame tongues and dancing alder fire devils flickered eternally there, weird night language, a red code in the dark, something glowing from the days gone by.

For eight years now, since Jack Marlow's advent, they had turned bright, winter and summer, spring and fall, and had given the ranch its name, Three Northwest Torches, and the steers their brand—three human hands gripping three smoking tapers, the figure 3 above them, the letters N.W. below.

Casual enough to the stranger, but both Court and Lou remembered well the legend that surrounded Marlow, like a shadow and which he hoped perhaps in the end to burn completely away.

Court and Lou remembered, but neither had opportunity to speculate about the legend just then.

Lou jumped down over the front wheel and when Court reared himself off the back of his neck, the

stage driver was lifting up the feet of his heaving wheelers, inspecting the numbers on their hoofs.

"Ain't my regular wheelers," Lou snorted wrathfully.

"That so?" blurted Court. "What in tarnation are they, then?"

"Not my wheel blacks at all."

"They look black enough to match your leaders."

"That's just the rub," growled Lou. "Like as peas, but somebody's slipped me a pair of my colts while my back was turned. Consarn the ornery son-of-a-gun that sleight-of-handed me one, I'll—"

## CHAPTER IV.

Lou's threats were ominous, for he had full charge of his stage route and accepted interference from nobody at all on the drive.

His Calgary-Macleod-Lethbridge run was a major road of these 80's and 90's, and all fast travelling in the district, which was not yet a province, was done over it both north and south of the Main Line.

Lou started from Calgary and came on a southeasterly slant, through Midnapore, High River, Mosquito Creek and Granum to Macleod, and then on to the terminus at Lethbridge.

When the road was dry he drove four horses.

In mud and wretched trailway he used a six-horse hitch that was stronger than the gumbo.

The long, rough road generally kept him out for two or three days on end if connections were good with the Narrow Gauge at Lethbridge and the Turkey Trail was not snow-blocked for a couple of weeks at a stretch in winter with snowploughs and shovellers digging her out of the drifts.

Lou prided himself on his horses and changed them frequently in fresh, dependable relays en route.

He resented instantly this underhanded trick and near-disruption of his schedule.

"The colts weren't properly broke," he raged. "I was just breaking them in and training them for the job of being wheelers."

"Where'd you change last?" Court asked him.

"At the Toe Cork Livery Stable on the Old Man River's bank."

"Who put the wheelers into the traces?"

"Toe Cork stable boy; same as usual—Toad Foster."

"Maybe Toad made a mistake," ventured Court.

"Toad doesn't make mistakes."

"It was a quick-change artist, then, you figure? Eh, Lou? An outsider?"

"Yep," snapped Lou, "a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't man. Somebody must have performed the switch after Toad hitched them up ready and went inside for his breakfast just before I left there."

"Anybody else at the Toe Cork Livery Stable, Lou?"

"Nobody else except that Three Torches top rider of yours, Staff Wylie, saddling his gray pony Badger with that three-thousand-dollar tooled-leather saddle of his studded with gold and silver studs. Where the heck does Staff get all the money to ride in that style?"

"That's a riddle, Lou."

"Sure is. You got a rich appearing top rider, Court. Where does he raise the dough?"

"Search me, Lou. Working by day and playing poker by night, maybe. Staff's lucky at poker."

"Poker don't make millionaires. Staff has another kind of throw-in some place."

"But Wylie! I left him on the night shift with the cattle. What in condemnation was he doing at the Toe Cork Livery Stable?"

"Changing my wheelers," Lou pointed out with a foreign grimace in his humor. "By thunder, I'll

settle with Staff when I come back this way and take time off to tarnish all the brass in his face and loosen all the gold in his teeth."

"I'll settle with Staff first," promised Court swiftly, "and then you can have your say."

Court had little admiration for his top rider.

For one thing, Wylie did not take orders easily.

For another, Staff was always making excuses off work to talk to Muriel, sneaking away to the ranch house for Jack Marlow's instructions on many things or across to the bunkhouse to punch fresh holes in girth or stirrup leather or bridle and to change his riding boots maybe three times a day.

Then, too, Wylie never could find lost Three Northwest Torch cattle.

Court was beginning to suspect that Wylie was secretly a nester himself, or else was working in with some of those who squatted on a homestead in the middle of a lease without a calf to their name and presently bellowed into the cattle business with a sizeable herd built up from neighbors' strays.

For though the railways cut through east and west and branch lines now were being pushed north and south, cattle and horses roamed the prairie at their own instinctive will.

The free herds were a constant temptation to white rustlers and white raiders and to the Bloods and the Peigans.

Even on full rations, the latter rode for mischief and adventure and warfare with their hereditary tribal enemies over the Medicine Line, the fighting Crows and Gros Ventres.

The lure of night barbecues round stolen steers intrigued them.

To evade detection, horses that they ran off in Canada were sold to travellers going south through the border states, and the bands they filched below the border were disposed of likewise to settlers headed north to the new pioneer Macleod district, home of the stockman, which the railways and the realtors and the legislators were trying to dignify with the appellation of Southern Alberta so that it might fill with prairie schooner-settlers from the United States and elect more than the one Parliament member and the one Senator allowed the huge territory.

"But why should Staff Wylie start your blacks, old or young, bucking, Lou?" propounded Court.

"I'm like you, Court," Lou returned. "I don't like Wylie. Had a little palaver and a show of fists with him on the northwest run, when I went by to Calgary first of the week."

"What was the trouble, Lou?"

"The doggone cowhand had fenced over my stage route along the railway on the edge of those lands they call Three Torches townsite."

"What happened, Lou?"

"Nothing. I broke Staff Wylie's fence in spite of him, and drove on. But that ain't all the trouble. Looks like Staff knew a three-cornered race was on to the Marlow place and wanted to put me out of it—accidental-like, you savvy."

"Meaning—that railway letter, Lou?"

"Sure, Court. Staff didn't want it delivered on

schedule. He didn't want Jack Marlow to get it before the sender arrived."

"Why—"

"Don't ask me why."

"How—"

"Don't ask me how your top rider knew about the letter. Just sit tight, Court. Staff Wylie or no Staff Wylie, this mail goes on time."

Lou jumped up into his place again and they plunged downhill.

"Staff Wylie'll be back, all right; before we get there," he yelled, "but we can't let Turkey Trail Tucker beat us in. See him coming anywhere yet, Court?"

Court Baker scanned the grade of the Main Line, curving off to the wall of the Rockies before them.

He stared at the fresh cuts of the Macleod end of the branch from Calgary, paved with new yellow ties and streaked with shining, spotless steel rails.

Spinning through the nearest cut, Court caught the glint of jigger handles and the see-saw motion of blue-overalled navvies pumping.

"Yeh! yonder's Rupert's hand-car," he sputtered through the gravel shower from the horses' heels, "and a work train backing down behind them. Go to it, Lou. I can shut my mouth and eyes."



## CHAPTER V.

"Do you see Constable Milt Slade yet?" roared Lou, lashing on.

In the distance, over towards Fort Stand Off, Court, squinting hard, detected another flash, this time of red—the Mounted uniform above a loping pony's back.

"Yeh! Constable's coming, too, on that lightning-legged, buck-jumping brown mustang he calls Deer-foot. Long way off yet. But you'll have to push it to nose him out, Lou."

"Wonder why Superintendent Steele didn't handle this himself from Fort Macleod headquarters," pondered Lou. "Or else send Sergeant Joyce out of Fort Stand Off."

"Maybe the Superintendent remembered Jack Marlow's fracas with the Great Falls and Canada Railway south of the border," guessed Court. "Down at Sweet Grass on the U. S. boundary, you know."

"Maybe," nodded Lou.

"Both the Superintendent and the Sergeant figured in that Great Falls and Canada dispute Jack had with Jimmy Hill's builders over his Montana lands," Court recalled. "A second interference by the Mounted is sort of rubbing it in. So Sam Steele might reason that Jack would take it better from somebody else. Another Mountie—see? Constable Milt Slade's new here. His regimental number's the last but one or two."

Court's guess was pretty shrewd.

That was the way Superintendent Steele figured it, the minute Jack Marlow's name was mentioned, when Roberts, an N. C. O., came into the orderly room at headquarters on his busy routine.

"What is it now?" asked Steele. "Anything pressing?"

"It's that Three Torches steel link-up," the N. C. O. explained. "Rupert Tucker's request for Police protection on Jack Marlow's ranch."

"Oh! Three Northwest Torches, eh?"

The Superintendent considered swiftly.

A show of force, the thunder of hoofs of a Mounted squad on lands that Jack Marlow considered his own, would rile the rancher instantly.

It was best to go about things with a one-man intervention.

"All right," he decided, "just let it be attended to in the routine way. Ride over to Stand Off and tell Sergeant Joyce to provide supervision of the driving of Tucker's last silver or iron or whatever kind of spike it is."

"Very good, sir."

The understanding N. C. O. saluted knowingly as he went out dispatched with the significant word.

Sergeant Joyce at Stand Off took his cue from the Superintendent's casual order when the N. C. O. arrived in haste over on the Belly River.

"Steele's a good scout," he commented. "Got to be a good sport myself to match him."

"And do it incognito, like?" grinned the wise N. C. O.

"Just that," smiled Sergeant Joyce. "I'll be there

in spirit, but the body'll be Milt Slade's. Eh, Milt? You ready to sprint over to Three Northwest Torches and witness the ceremony of driving the final spike?"

"Ready for anything, anywhere," announced Constable Milt Slade, straddling the brown mustang, Deerfoot, picketed in front of Stand-Off post.

Joyce watched him with an admiring eye.

A hard rider himself, reliable, thorough, efficient, the Sergeant was not one of those red-coated recruits whom the traditional five years in the Force wore out.

Joyce's experience went back eight years or so to the Great Falls and Canada affair when Jack Marlow was dispossessed of Montana open range in a similar manner.

Now, this time, the Sergeant knew that his versatile, able Constable Milton Slade could carry the Mounted Police authority onto Three Torches ranchland without anything personal in it, without the lenience of good neighborliness or the antagonism of bad.

"Milt, you're brand-new," he excused himself with shrewd diplomacy.

"Yes, I am," admitted Milt cheerily. "Paint not dry on my spiked dress helmet yet. Water colors still moist on my uniform."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Sergeant. "So they are. And your conscience is clear—that's the main thing."

Milt had no grudge against Jack.

Jack had none against Milt, unless it might be the sight of the scarlet tunic which had hounded the rebellious rancher so long before.

Like some of Jack's Three Northwest Torches calves, Milt was hardly dry behind the ears yet, compared to the grizzled Sergeant.

But Slade had class, good looks, education to start with, and police and military instruction in a steady grind since his joining at district headquarters had proved him up as a genuine acquisition.

Slade imbibed all the divisional lectures on duties, filled any vacancy in various districts and let the commandants mostly shape his future career.

He had listened well to Sergeant Joyce's advice and to Steele's.

"Throw away the mounted infantry rule book," the Sergeant summed it up. "Swear by the mounted rifle system. Specialize indefatigably in horsemanship."

Milt had stuck to the pick of the Mounted riding teachers in a hard school.

Already he could ride his fifty miles a day with the best of the old-timers and could shoot unerringly from the saddle with either revolver or carbine.

Sergeant Joyce watched the Constable keenly as he loped rapidly out of Stand Off on his mission.

"There goes another," he pointed proudly.

"Like yourself, Sergeant," the N. C. O. humored him.

"You bet your arduous life, Roberts. A young pup with the height, the weight and the brains to last over two or three times those usual five years in the N. W. M. P."

"If he doesn't get in the way of a gunman's or

hold-up's or renegade Blood's bullet some time," hazarded N. C. O. Roberts.

The Constable's horse, Deerfoot, was a fit mate for the boy, with a turn of speed that soon left the Sergeant blinking at nothing and brought its rider looming rapidly larger in Court Baker's distant perspective from his stage seat.

"Cutting it down like a scythe in coulee hay, Lou," Court reported as he watched the red blur of the uniform grow. "Roll your old wagon wheels along."

## CHAPTER VI.

LOU GATES whipped on his stage coach across the bed ground and the river flat of the home range, the sound of running water coming up to them on the scented morning breeze, together with the bawling and stamping of cattle on the grazing grass nearby, the whinnying of the ponies in the corral, the ringing of Peter the Greek's breakfast signal as he hammered on a suspended triangle of iron.

The cook's voice reached them in a high, musical call, as if he were singing an aria.

"Chuck's ready—come and get it—or I bang shut the old wagon box—the old wagon box—the old wagon box, yes, sirree, bub."

Peter gestured with his culinary utensils, a white-clad gnome of a man with swarthy features shining as if oiled, black eyes flashing vividly, curled mustache quivering to the tremolo pursing of his white-toothed mouth.

In answer to his summons, Court and Lou caught the sound of the cowboys riding herd growing into a drum roll as they faced each other to the chuck wagon, Staff Wylie at the head of the group, his gray pony Badger easily the speediest under its luxurious saddle. Staff's tall, lithe figure matched the saddle in his expensive silver-colored chaps, gold-cloth shirt and metal-ornamented sombrero. All round him the Three Northwest Torches hands were yipping and yodelling in the carefree moment of coming off duty and exchanging places with the day shift, and loudest

of all carolled the top rider—just as if he had not been off the range all night. Wylie's face gleamed bronzed in the risen sun, high-lighted on solid chin, heavy cheeks and bony nose, as he yelled and joked with the men, and the whites of his pale blue eyes flickered oddly when he threw back his black-thatched head.

The banging of Peter's pots, pans and dishes punctuated their hubbub, to merge into the noise of their eating and drinking in a steady grind, and the tinny sound of breakfast in the open was spaced with a porcelain rattle from the ranch house kitchen. Through the open window Court and Lou had a glimpse of Muriel and Aunt Flo setting the table, Muriel in her yellow flowered dress, her golden hair shining vividly, her girlish figure shifting twice as fast as the robust bulk of her aunt, garbed in a blue apron tied over her gray linen skirt and matching blouse.

The song of the steaming kettle timed their coming and going around the table and cook stove and upon the moist air drifted the savor of poached eggs bubbling and bacon sputtering in the pan. Now and then a bit of grease falling on the fire beacons their heads with a sudden flare, Muriel's beautiful, smooth ivory features, ruby-lipped, jewel-eyed, Aunt Flo's facial expanse fat and ruddy as if she had carmined her puffed cheeks and dimpled chin.

So brightly flamed the firelight inside the house and so brilliantly streamed the sunlight from the outside across the window sill, that the combined illumination revealed to Court and Lou the half re-

cumbent figure of Mrs. Jack Marlow propped on her elbow upon the upholstered bed couch which evidently had been moved on its castors out of the bedroom by the women in order that Muriel's mother might look at the sunrise through the opened sash with its spotlessly white muslin curtains blowing in the wind. They saw her, frail and fair, beautiful mother of a beautiful daughter, looking like a rare orchid in a dress of mauve crepe, her eyes shades darker than Muriel's, amethyst eyes or maybe violet, with no apparent sign of sickness on her face, unless it might be the dark shadows like faint purple smudges under those wonderful eyes, the constant movement of her white hands to her throat and the nervous working of her lips as she talked with Muriel and Jack Marlow's sister.

Mrs. Marlow's voice was too faint, or too cultured, for Court and Lou to hear as they swung near, nor could they catch the comments of the daughter and Aunt Flo conversing over the stove. Like the mother's lips, they watched Muriel's shapely lips move, only Muriel's were more mobile, stronger, and although they did not hear her words, Aunt Flo heard and turned her brown eyes windowward to stare through the open space while she brushed back her chestnut-covered hair with her busy hands, hair that seemed determined to make curly bangs on her sweating forehead.

"There go the riders to the chuck wagon, Aunt Flo," Muriel was saying.

"Yes, and our own breakfast is ready, Muriel," beamed Aunt Flo.



"And mother's, too."

"Yes, Muriel. Ask her what she'll have."

Muriel smiled across at her mother, sun-bathed in the window nook like a purple clad nymph.

"What do you feel like eating this morning, mother? Something inviting, eh?"

"Yes, Alice, dear, something nice and nourishing," suggested Aunt Flo persuasively. "First there's poached eggs and toast."

Alice Marlow refused somewhat weakly.

"Nothing, Flo, dear — nothing, Muriel, honey — thanks all the same. My heart's rather fluttery yet. I—"

They heard her short breathing, a little muffled under the billowy-curtain folds, and the creak of the castors as she turned restlessly on the bed couch.

"But you should eat something, Alice dear," Aunt Flo kindly covered the pause.

"Oh! yes, mother," Muriel insisted; "you must keep your strength up."

"I—I've had a bad night, no appetite at all," confessed Mrs. Marlow. "Where's Jack this morning?"

"Dad's on the porch, mother," Muriel told her. "He has walked it all night, in spite of all I could say to him. Just walked—on the watch! Listen to his never-ending steps."

The sound of Jack Marlow's heavy riding boots echoed on the wind and a faint vibration set up by his pacing of the stoop penetrated the room. A sudden apprehensive expression crept over Alice's face as she listened.

"You'd better make Jack come in and eat," she cautioned. "Get him away from those old six-guns the Mounted Police ordered the ranchers to stop wearing. Jack isn't wearing the six-shooters the way he threatened, is he?"

Aunt Flo raised her eyebrows significantly to Muriel and whispered softly.

"We'll have to keep her quiet, Muriel," she intimated.

Muriel whispered back.

"Yes, quiet's the word. Mother's worrying her heart out over this Three Northwest Torches Ranch business."

Aunt Flo spoke aloud, expressing herself soothingly.

"No—not wearing the guns, Alice, dear," she qualified her remarks.

Alice Marlow looked up suspiciously.

"Where are those six-shooters of Jack's?" she demanded. "You two have just got to tell me."

Muriel tried to pass it off, although she had her own apprehensions.

"Mother, stop fretting, please," she pleaded. "The old revolvers are in their usual place, in dad's old gunbelt hanging on the elk horns on the porch wall."

"Since when?"

"Dad hung them there the day the Mounted Police sent out the order and Sam Steele put the law into effect at Fort Macleod. Dad's never worn them since."

Alice Marlow shook her head in nervous doubt.

"Watch Jack doesn't wear them, Flo," she warned the aunt.

"Of course, of course, but Jack's not going to do anything rash," murmured Jack's sister.

"Rest easy, mother," Muriel proceeded to calm her. "Don't worry about things that haven't happened—aren't likely to happen, you understand."

"No, I'll not worry—much. But watch Jack doesn't wear them all the same. I know your father's temper under strain, Muriel. So never mind me, but get Jack inside to breakfast and then hide those guns. If he takes a shot at someone in that railway gang, it won't be too good for me."

"All right, mother—all right, I'll try."

Muriel stepped across the floor to the doorway, but paused a moment at the sound of turning wheels rumbling up abruptly in front.

"Oh! here's the stage driver, Lou Gates, coming," she cried, diverted.

"I thought I heard horses' hoofs," observed her mother; "that is, driven horses, besides our own boys' ponies."

"And Court's with him," Muriel announced gladly. "I must run out and see if they have any mail, or any news, mother."

The patter of Muriel's agile, running feet drifted back in to Aunt Flo and Alice as she broke eagerly out of the doorway.

"Now Muriel has gone outside," sighed Alice, in a sort of resigned protest. "With Court, Lou, the mail and all, she'll forget about those six-guns of Jack's."

## CHAPTER VII.

STRIDING in its ceaseless circuit of the porch, the wide-shouldered, square-set bulk of Jack Marlow almost shut out the dawnlight at the farther end as he turned to the patter of Muriel's footsteps. His brown riding boot-heels rang heavily. His nickled spurs jingled. Still there was no slither of a cartridge belt around his ivory flannel-shirted waist nor flap of holsters on his gray moleskin trouser-encased thighs. Jack was not wearing any guns—yet, and the solid strength of his slim-hipped, big-chested figure rather belied the need of them.

Defiance emanated from his sharp-cut, striking personality, belligerence, if one might so term his readiness to fight for his own interests without going out of his way to pick a quarrel with anyone. It showed in the handsome stubbornness of his features, in the wild curl of his sandy hair under the yellow sombrero, in the sweeping flash of cloud-gray eyes out of the sombrero's rim shadow, in the hint of haughty inquiry in his thinly bridged nose, in the parting of pearl-lustered teeth between ruddy lips, as if he hurled a sudden challenge without speaking at all.

His broad back blocked out the dawnlight momentarily, but some inner illumination of spirit radiated from him at sight of his daughter, for his olive-tanned face glowed with a smile that was like the impact of a sun shaft.

"What's all the hurry, Muriel—it's hardly sun-up yet?" he asked jocularly in a voice as resonant as a

booming mountain wind, yet tender as a bird call off the summits. "Where you going? And how was your mother when she woke?"

"Mother's fussing, dad. She needs something to take her mind off herself. Maybe this is it—the mail, you see. Look! Wagon and horses are black silhouettes there against the sun ball."

"So they are, inky cut-outs, sure enough," agreed her father, "and I never saw them slip in. Must have been dozing on my feet."

The turning wheels stopped with a crunch.

"Whoa! consarn you runaways," Lou Gates bawled at the skittish colts.

"Hello, Lou," Muriel called to him. "Any mail? Papers? Letters?"

Lou laughed slyly.

"No love letters, Muriel," he explained facetiously, "because Carl's such a good talker—haw!—humph!"

Muriel and Court laughed with him.

"Muriel, don't you listen to Lou," Court advised. "Lou's only talking to himself. Goes along the Calgary-Lethbridge Trail like that, driving bughouse all the time."

"The Calgary-Lethbridge Trail would turn a wise man nutty with complications of late," Lou complained, "but I got a sample parcel for you, Muriel."

"Oh! what?" asked Muriel with almost childlike eagerness.

"Package of Prairie Rose soap."

"Well, that's fine of you, Lou."

"Yep! Prairie Rose. To keep you a schoolgirl yet. Though that complexion of yours hardly needs it."

Say, Court, ain't she rosy so early in the morning?"

Court stared at her raptly.

"Rosier'n the sunrise," he declared.

Muriel blushed a little deeper and flashed Court a mischievous smile as she took the mailing sample from Lou.

"Thanks awfully, Lou, that's a nice sample," she enthused.

"Pah! you won't have much use for it, Muriel," Lou said teasingly.

Muriel's laughter bubbled louder with its pleasing ring.

"But it helps wonderfully, Lou," she contended.

Lou turned his humor on his comrade:

"Muriel, you better give the Prairie Rose to Court," he proposed. "Yep! To smooth him up."

Muriel's blue eyes ran critically over Court.

"Where have you been, Court?" she demanded.

"You look so touselled and sleepy."

Court shot a glance across the porch at Jack Marlow before he answered. Jack caught that significant look and his own in silent response was like a lightning telepathic flash.

"I was sleeping with the gophers," Court excused himself, wiggling some of the tails that protruded from his pockets and talking half to Muriel, half to Jack, "but I had one eye open. An awful lot of gophers round Old Man River, Jack—I mean, Muriel, and more wandering across the old Indian ford this morning."

The sound of Jack's boots scraped closer as he stepped up to the platform edge.

"Then you saw somebody out there, Court?" Jack deduced very quietly.

"Lou did," Court evaded. "Lou's got a letter for you in his mail-bag."

There was the rattle of the lock on Lou's mail bag while he fished for it. Then Lou's voice boomed out quite cheerfully.

"Yep! here it is, Jack," he shouted. "Hope it ain't goshawful news. Though the coat-of-arms in the corner does suggest a bird of ill omen—turkey vulture."

The long, official-looking envelope rustled ominously as Jack Marlow grabbed it from Lou's hand, tore off the end and spread the inside sheet against the veranda post where the sunlight hit it. He commenced to read it aloud:

"Dear Jack:

I'm sorry for this notice, but I have no choice. The Calgary-Macleod Branch closes your gap in their survey this morning. As their solicitor I'm ordered to report it done. So I've asked that a Mounted man (Constable Milt Slade, I understand) be on hand—"

Jack broke off, turning his angry face to the others who were listening anxiously.

"Tarnation on Rupert Tucker," he denounced. "Tucker could have worked it out to pass the steel by my house and my sick wife if he'd liked. There's your fine, Three Torches Town fellow for you, Muriel."

Muriel's eyes grew indignant.

"I never said Rupert Tucker was fine," she as-

serted hotly. "I used him well, hospitably, as guest and friend whenever he came here—"

"Which was often," her father pointed out.

"Yes, often," she continued. "Rupert found a welcome the same as every other visitor to Three Northwest Torches Ranch. That welcome won't come any more. Now I—I believe I entirely despise him."

She gazed at Court, to see if he was thinking of accusing her too, but Court was silent, exchanging worried glances with Lou.

In the awkward silence Lou shook out his lines.

"Plumb sorry, Jack," he sympathized at last. "Anything I can do?"

Jack Marlow grimly removed Rupert Tucker's letter from the post.

"Not a thing, Lou," he returned. "You can't stop here any longer, anyway. Got to keep going on your route to Lethbridge."

Lou nodded as if relieved.

"Yep! I got to lope ahead. Well, so long, everybody. Constable Milt Slade ain't such a bad citizen, Jack. Maybe he'll make some saw-off for you. Whatever turns up, send the news after me quick with one of your long-distance smoke signs."

Lou nodded to the three fires burning on the prairie as he spoke to his leaders.

The rumbling stage coach started on and Lou's young blacks, still restive, whisked it away in the distance.

Thoughtfully watching it fade, the rancher stood rustling the offensive document in his fingers.

"Heck of a paper salute, this," he snorted. "There's



only one answer to that letter of Tucker's."

Jack's boot-heels crunched as he wheeled to the porch wall and reached for the elk horns.

The rubbing of the old cartridge belt and the banned guns sounded under his hand.

Muriel's voice cried out in protest.

"Oh! don't buckle the guns on, dad.- Mother!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

JACK buckled the six-guns on.

"The answer's round my middle," he announced. "I'm not an inch fatter'n I was some time ago. Belt buckle's in the same old hole."

Muriel's cry for her mother's veto was heard in the living room. Alice Marlow's sensitive ears had detected and interpreted the leather belt language even before she caught Jack's determined words. She called out, a little weakly, from her couch.

"Jack, you musn't—Jack. My stars, Jack."

Her voice faded in the louder clamor of the puffing work train backing down toward the ranch house, in the clacketty-clang of the jigger wheels ahead of the work train bumping over freshly fish-plated rail joints where the nuts were not yet tightened on the bolts. The work train, its jangling flat cars loaded with ties and steel rails to close the gap, pulled up with a warning whistle shriek at the near end of the cut, and the grade gang, sitting along the flat car sides, jumped down to pass the needed material forward.

The hand-car pumpers, navvies in blue overalls and long-peaked railway caps, swung briskly to the ground, seized the wooden lifting handles on each end of the jigger and set it off the rails to let the work train closer in. One navvy waved his arm in slow motion, signalling the engineer as he backed farther into position. The other navvies trooped ahead, trampling heavily, shouldering transits, shovels, sledges, pinch bars, wrench bars, spike boxes, all the

necessary tools making a businesslike rattle amid the hum of their enthusiastic comments as they came along.

For the link-up was a moment of achievement for the railway gang. They walked the laid ties proudly, hip-swinging in their long overstride that always skipped the middle tie of every three, because to them the steel highway was a thing of beauty, full-ballasted, curve-banked, receding evenly, smoothly, symmetrically behind them. Also, they had a public to view their handiwork, a crowd that gathered magically and followed them along the grade—Three Torches Towners, Fort Macleoders, Pincher Creek people and onlookers from a score of other places throughout the district.

Most of them were good friends of Jack Marlow, near neighbors, men who had a constant welcome at his house, men who kept trust with him as he did with them, especially his fellow ranchers Allen Bean Macdonald of the Glengarry, Charlie Sharples of the Winder, Joe Macfarland of the Pioneer, Bright of Bright's Ranch, La Grandeur of Old Man River, "North Fork" Thibandeau from Kootenay River, and others who either had reason not to like Rupert Tucker's colonization methods or who naturally sympathized strongly with the owner of Three Northwest Torches Ranch in his emergency.

Marlow had other sympathizers in the crowd as well, friends of a different skin color, red men off the reserves, the Peigan Indians and the Bloods, Chief North Axe's marauding young bucks, Burnt Hill and Whistling Bird; Flying Cloud of the Peigans; Chief

Red Crow's raiding night riders, Dark Sun, Storm Feather and Quick Foot; and more of the Bloods. These might steal Jack's Three Northwest Torches cattle and run off his horses among other ranchers' stock, but outside of that border business they stood staunchly behind him in trouble and awaited eagerly the chance to break with Rupert Tucker, who always was making complaints about their depredations along the line to their Indian agents, Harry Nash and Jim Wilson.

So Rupert Tucker's figure was the focus point for every eye in the gathering and his figure was an incongruous one among the overalled, smocked steel layers. Tucker wore black broadcloth and white linen without a grease spot on either, and his shiny, fur felt bowler hat had never bounced once from a bucking broncho's back. His black shoes shone in spite of the eddying grade dust and his hands flashed lily-white while he waved them in earnest conversation with the gang foreman, Tom Braddick.

Tucker's gold-rimmed spectacles, gracing his short-sighted green eyes, heliographed the sun rays that flickered, too, on his chunky gold signet ring, his heavy gold watch chain and massive gold cuff links. Being short of stature, he took every tie in his hopping walk and swung his head from side to side to match his body swing, sowing his words broadcast. His smooth-shaven face carried the official expression that long perusal of files and documents had stamped on it, the nose curious, tilted, the mouth drawn down as if he considered every word thoughtfully, shrewdly, thoroughly before he allowed his decisions to be

emitted in impressive language.

Features long, severe, but altogether prepossessing, ended in an adamant chin that advertised him as a strict carrier-through of orders from men higher up, as a stickler whom no item of detail, large or small, could escape. His voice was persuasive, declamatory, friendly, almost teasing, and tinged with the laughingly cynical—perhaps from the influence of the many legal actions he had taken in his vicarious career.

Although short-sighted, Tucker saw the stage coach going out and knew that Lou Gates must have delivered mail at the ranch. He saw also the breakfasting ranch hands gathered round the chuck wagon, and he stepped off the grade as he passed by them, flicking a peremptory white hand at their top rider. Staff Wylie detached himself from the group and, munching at the bannock in his one fist and sipping at the coffee cup in his other fist, took a couple of strides to meet him in a curiosity-breeding, speculative way.

"I notice Lou Gates has been in, Staff," Tucker observed with dry significance, speaking casually and softly so that his voice did not carry to the noisy campfire band.

"Yes, I reckon Lou has," replied Wylie, with the air of a man who admitted something—a failure, perhaps.

"I had to send a letter because the executive ordered one sent," Tucker reminded him, "but you'll remember that I intended to beat the letter here."

There was the faintest trace of reprimand in the lawyer's expression.

Staff's tone in reply was apologetic.

"Yes, I remember."

"Then you'll recall that you promised I would be here before it was," Tucker went on.

"Lou's a heap better driver than I figured," returned the top rider, his inflection this time excusing someone—maybe himself.

"Well, are you going to keep the jackpot check I gave you over last night's game?" demanded Tucker. "Or are you going to return it?"

"Next time we play poker, Tucker," grinned Wylie.

Tucker stared at Staff momentarily, his eyeglasses glittering, but not another word passed between them.

Rupert hopped on along the grade.

Staff wheeled back to the cooking fire for another bannock and an extra cup of coffee.

## CHAPTER IX.

WITH Lou Gates gone, Muriel Marlow and Court Baker stood watching uneasily the advance of Tucker's gang.

Muriel spoke in a whisper.

"Court, can't you do something?" she implored. "Goodness, dad will shoot somebody."

Court muttered back grimly.

"I'll bring our T. N. T. riders," he decided. "The riders will block Tucker's men off. They'll crowd between the navvies and your dad, Muriel."

"Yes, do, Court. Bring the boys over here."

Raising his voice, Court turned to Jack Marlow.

"Some gang, Jack," he commented meaningly. "Rupert Tucker's there."

Marlow seemed to be gripped with a tenseness that was almost excitement.

"I'm not seeing Constable Milt Slade—yet," Jack barked to Court.

Court attempted diplomacy.

"Say, Jack, maybe they're too many for us," he ventured appraisingly.

Marlow laughed shortly.

"Two straight shooters are plenty for that pack," he pointed out.

"Yeh! but we don't want to dry gulch them all," demurred Court. "I'll bring our grub-chawing boys right over and—"

Jack waved his hands sternly.

"Leave the boys where they are, Court," he enjoined.

"But we need some help, Jack."

"No, we don't, Court."

"Time they left the chuck wagon anyhow," argued Court. "Always busting their bellies."

Court started to yip-hoo-o-o a call for the riders. Jack interrupted him--

"Come back here, Court," his boss ordered sharply.

"But, Jaek," the foreman temporized, "but--"

Jack bellowed loudly at him.

"Stay where you are, Court. I'm running this. Here's Tucker all dressed up and some place to go. So, you, Tucker," his voice rose thunderously, "stop just there where you are."

Tucker stopped and raised his bowler hat politely.

"Good morning, Jack," he smiled. "Good morning, Muriel. How do you do, Court. I'm awfully sorry, you know, but apparently you must have got the railway executive's letter about the link-up."

Jack Marlow threw the letter straight into the lawyer's face.

"Take your letter back," he yelled. "Stop short on that path, Tucker."

Tucker recovered his disarranged spectacles.

"Oh! be decent, Jack," he pleaded. "They've built the road up on both sides of you--left it open for you as long as possible. The gang simply has to connect up the rails now."

Jack shook his fist where the letter had gone.

"You're a slick schemer, Tucker. You fiddled with volumes of land grants and files till you found a way



to make a flaw in my homestead holding."

"It's not my fault, Jack," Tucker protested. "It's not my fault at all, Muriel. You can't blame me because the Government granted the C. P. R. all the odd numbers of land parcels and yours somehow happened to be odd. Yours was never even, Jack. Some error at the first. Bad mistake farther back. You all know that the railway has earned already by its expenditures and extensions throughout the Northwest just about twenty-five million acres. All the odd number grants it has got so far is under six millions, so you can't call that a grab. Ask Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton. He's the Lands Commissioner for the railway now, one member of the original C. P. R. executive. Hamilton has surveyed and located all the townsites in the West from Grenville (now Vancouver) to Saskatoon and Calgary, including Three Torches here. Come, come, Muriel, you must see it, surely—about twenty millions of land they're short."

But Muriel was fully as indignant as her father.

"It is your fault, Rupert," she insisted, "taking our hospitality, sitting by our fires of neighborliness, welcome and trust and then turning hostile. Do you expect us to entertain you at Three Northwest Torches ranch house after this?"

"You'd entertain Court, wouldn't you, Muriel?" propounded Tucker teasingly.

"I—I don't know," replied the girl. "Court never has time to be entertained. Court's just one of the family hereabouts."

Even in the moment of tension, Court and Muriel

laughed merrily together.

Tucker laughed too, a little cynically.

"But Court's always hanging round here, every day," he persisted.

"I'll be around for a long time yet, Tucker, watching the Northwest railways being granted all the open range on both sides of their tracks."

"It's quite proper for you to watch," conceded Tucker, "as long as you don't stick your tongue into the dispute, Court."

"It's handier than sticking my guns into your ribs, Rupert," Court warned.

Tucker smiled somewhat sneeringly.

"I'm not a bit afraid of that, Court," he came back instantly. "You can't scare me."

"Say, Tucker, you know how many gophers I knocked off before daylight was in these western skies?" Court asked with a snarl. "Just look at these tails. That's good shooting in the dark, and I wouldn't mind adding another to my tally. Rupert, you sure dodge like one."

"Bluffs don't work with me, Court," Tucker asserted boastfully.

"You call me a bluffer?"

"I don't call anybody names, Court. It never pays to use opprobrium."

"What's that?" demanded Court. "Smokeless powder?"

The lawyer chuckled.

"Sort of skunk spray," he defined humorously. "So I'm not a mite feazed, Court. 'Cause look! Yonder's Constable Milt Slade coming."

Tucker pointed across the bed ground of the home range at a galloping rider.

There the crimson uniform of the Mounted man was dancing like a fourth fire upon the open prairie land.

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## CHAPTER X.

RIDING like the wind that whipped his scarlet-and-tan cheeks and combed out the brown waves of his hair under his Stetson hat, the Constable pulled Deerfoot over Gopher Gulch and headed across the valley straight for the Marlow ranch house beyond.

His blue eyes, wide-spaced, far-ranging, alert, with the blazing vigor of carefree youth playing in each darting glance, took in everything upon the flat.

He saw Lou Gates' stage going out, the work train and the hand-car coming in, the assembling crowds, Indian and white, the semi-fixed setting of the herds now in grazing movement toward the outer range with the day shift of riders tailing them in the T. N. T.'s last round-up, the campfire group of Staff Wylie's on the bed ground, the corrals and the ranch buildings beside.

Slade glimpsed them all mostly in the distance, not slowing sufficiently, either mentally or physically, in his whirlwind ride to attempt identification of the human figures in the spacious, varihued picture, all silvers, golds and greens, bordered by the purple-blue frame of the Rockies.

Yet the moment his eyes alighted on the top rider's gray pony Badger with its ornate saddle, the Constable pulled up sharply, his glance running over the pony's owner with something like recognition.

"You're Wylie, Staff Wylie, T. N. T. top rider," Slade began, more as an assertion than as a question.

"Sure," nodded Wylie, sizing up the strong, tall,

heavy, erect figure of the Mounted representative sitting the champion brown mustang, noting his decided jaw, straight, purposeful mouth lean-lipped and white-toothed, his athletic nose that quivered when he breathed heavily, as if the nostrils were scarcely large enough to inflate the lungs in his broad chest.

"I was here last night, about midnight, on patrol," Slade told him in a voice even, official, masculinely vibrant but possessing also a ring of resolution and command that seemed to match fitly his powerful individuality. "Commandant Steele sent me out to check on the herd count. There had been complaints of strays, you see. Nobody was here to sign my patrol slip. So I'll just kill two jobs with one ride and let you sign it now."

"Of course, Constable—"

"Slade; Milt Slade."

"Of course, Constable Slade," agreed Staff.

He took Slade's patrol slip and signed it.

"No complaints, then, Wylie?" the Constable asked.

"Nary a complaint," the top rider assured him very complacently.

Slade stared calculatingly at the Marlow herd the cow hands were encircling.

"Last round-up on the T. N. T., I hear, Wylie," he observed.

"Looks like it," replied Staff. "Since the railway's taking over, it's got to be."

"Cattle going north to Calgary as usual, I suppose?"

"That's the present layout," Wylie informed him. "Boss is mad as Hades. Selling and shipping the whole caboodle."

"I just wanted to know for sure in advance," Slade explained. "Because if they were bound south instead of north, I'd have to transfer them through the Customs at St. Mary's River. Our Fort Macleod commander, Steele, would raise a young hurricane if I happened to miss them there before they hit United States territory."

"Why should they go south instead of north?" demanded Wylie. "Marlow steers never have gone south to the Great Falls and Canada line when the C. P. R. is nearer."

"Some have gone south, at times, so's the rumor I've picked up on my midnight rides," the Constable amended. "I just told you there had been complaints."

"Mavericks missing, maybe," Staff volunteered. "Indian barbecue beef, maybe. Odd strays, maybe. No-account stuff. You can't call that a run-off."

"Where were you when I missed you last night?" asked the Mounted man.

"Playing poker," confessed Wylie promptly. "Got into a stiff game and I was late."

"I know," Slade intimated, "at the Toe Cork Hotel."

"How do you savvy that?" ventured the top rider.

"I was there at the Toe Cork looking on. Commandant Steele sent me. There had been complaints. Too many aces in the card packs."

Slade was looking still at Wylie's riders, the chuck

wagon, Peter the Greek, the cooking fire, the branding fire, the range fire, but he saw these things only as one sees through bifocal lenses. At that moment also, with a sort of montage vision, he was sighting down the Toe Cork barroom boasting its ruddy mahogany counter, its polished brass foot rail, its glittering glass, drinking ware and gold-banded cigar boxes, its tin hanging lamps hazing a Northwest crowd with blue vapor that drifted over the poker tables at the end. He saw Staff Wylie playing at the wall side with a man in black and white, gold plated glasses and a bowler hat.

"If you were a spectator, and primed with interest, why didn't you bone me to sign that patrol slip right there?" Wylie inquired.

"The Toe Cork Hotel was hardly the place to sign for an O.K. herd count," the Constable reminded him. "Besides, you were busy. I didn't dare to interrupt. Might knock your system out. Heavy stakes, weren't they?"

"Tolerably," admitted Wylie. "How could you estimate?"

"I heard you say to Bowler Hat: 'It'll take one thousand dollars to settle that'."

"Well, did it?"

"I guess it did. I went into the dining room while Bowler Hat was writing you a check. I went in to drink a cup of coffee with Toad Foster sitting down for his breakfast."

Again Slade looked at Wylie and the outfit, only seeing instead the Toe Cork Hotel dining room table, white-clothed, blue willow-ware-set, with its green

milk glasses, amber cheese dishes, silver cruet stands where the vivacious French-Canadian waitress, Annette Royale, raven-haired, jade-eyed, pink-cheeked and full of smiles chaffed the curly-headed, warty-faced young Toad Foster admiring her through beaming cinnamon eyes and stuffing his squat, rotund body with a panful of bacon and eggs. He visioned himself stepping out then with Toad to the still dim livery stable, smelling of hay and grain feed and leather, to saddle his mustang Deerfoot, and of Toad suddenly laying a surprised hand on a couple of stage coach blacks in a nearby stall.

Slade imagined that Staff Wylie saw the livery stable too, because Staff had just gone out ahead of them to saddle this gray pony, standing right here, with the mint of gold and silver and tooled leather on its back.

"That's when Toad Foster said to me: 'Now there'll be heck to pay,'" recalled the Constable aloud. "That's when Toad asked: 'Does Lou Gates want to break his condemned neck, changing relays back again, taking out raw colts instead of broke horses after me just hitching them up?'"

"Well, did Lou?" grinned Wylie, with a squint at the far out stage.

"Apparently Lou didn't," the Constable observed. "But say, it seems to me I've seen you somewhere before that, Wylie. I've been trying to place you. By George, I have it now. Down at Sweet Grass, on the Great Falls and Canada Railway, the day it was held up. I was mail clerk on that Montana train."

Staff Wylie's mouth opened wide, amazement, in-



credulity, curiosity and something else, like disconcertment, sweeping in successive waves over his face.

"Montana man before you joined the Mounted, eh?" Staff blurted.

"Montana boy," smiled Slade reminiscently.

"Young then, weren't you?"

"Eighteen or nineteen."

"And—and now?"

"Twenty-six or twenty-seven."

"That's—that's what I'd call coincidence," breathed Wylie heavily.

"Compensation might be the better word," corrected Slade. "Imposing the keeping of the peace on the man who was suspected of holding me up. I haven't seen Jack Marlow since that day."

"But—but Slade wasn't the name of that Montana mail clerk on the Great Falls and Canada," argued Wylie in half bewilderment now. "I was in the crowd that hold-up day and in the chase when the posse was skunked. I remember the fracas distinct as blazes."

"No doubt you do," laughed Slade meaningly. "Mine was one of those double-barrelled names then—Hamilton Slade-Arliss, to spell it in full. When I joined the Mounted I chopped it down to Milt Slade. My Universal saddle was heavy enough itself without carrying all that."

The Constable reined out as he spoke.

He galloped along as if he suddenly regretted his abrupt pause in the swift rush that meant performance of his duty.

"Say, just a second," Wylie yelled after him. "Did Commandant Sam Steele or Sergeant Joyce know that?"

"I never mentioned it to them," the Mounted man chuckled back over his shoulder. "Name on the payroll's Milt Slade. Regimental number's factory new. The Northwest officers like to raise their own recruits."

## CHAPTER XI.

THE Constable's appearance on the dusty horizon gave Tucker confidence.

"I don't swallow any threats, Court," he declared. "Remember that the Mounted Police law is near enough to call on."

The anxious Muriel tried to parley.

"Then you'd better wait, Rupert," she begged.

"Wait till Constable Slade gets here."

Tucker however imagined that this was the psychological moment for the link-up. It was his plan to make a swift connection under the looming shadow of the law before the Mounted man actually arrived and started an argument with Marlow, perhaps a general fight, involving the whole crowd of Jack's friends, that would block completion of the branch line.

"No, the Calgary-Macleod Railway doesn't wait for anybody," he refused.

"But, Rupert, you have the authority to make a little postponement."

Tucker shook his determined head.

"No, Muriel, I'm under orders, too. I'd get fired like the rest of the employees if I didn't keep moving pretty fast."

"You can order a temporary halt," she persisted.

"I can't. Why, should I? You say you can't give me temporary hospitality now."

Tucker turned to the foreman, Tom Braddick, bare-armed, bare-headed, his age-yellowed hair matching his ochreous mustache that hung so loosely

under his long blistered nose to reflect the light of green eyes glaring like switch lamps.

"Go ahead, Tom," he urged, as the work gang came stumbling behind the foreman, bearing the heavy steel rails and the ties for the only remaining road gap.

"Tell your navvies to slide their stuff onto the ballast and drive the last spike. The surveyors will give you the line at the porch."

Tom Braddick, muscled like a grizzly, swung his hairy, sun-smoked arm, beckoning the navvies.

"Come on, boys," Tom ordered. "Ballast the ties. Gauge the rails. Here's the transitman. He'll sing out the levels for you."

Bert Gaudar, the transitman, slim, youthful, with the saucy School of Science face, brown Norfolk clothes and leather gauntlets, was squinting spark-eyed at his theodolite, calling out his figures for the benefit of the rodman, George Parker, who, thin as his wand but highly colored in features, football jersey and Alpine hat, stuck up the picket on the grade.

"Six, ten — four, thirty-five — eighty-two," Gaudar sang, tenor-voiced. "Step her over to the right. Left a shade. Fixed. There she lines. Hold her."

Tom Braddick tossed a handful of spikes to the navvies.

"Spit on them for luck," he grinned, singling out one man to drive, a little brown-bearded man with a solemn face and the back of his head all bald.

The little man caught the spikes as they came to him and laid them on the chosen ties.

"Handle the sledge, Buck Crossley," the foreman

directed him. "Others'll start them."

"Okay, Tom," nodded Buck Crossley, somewhat more solemn than usual.

The other navvies started the spikes, and Buck Crossley, swinging his sledge with unerring dexterity, commenced to hammer them swiftly home.

His blows rattled the porch walls, and Jack Marlow's voice interrupted vindictively from the *stoep* while Buck approached.

"You'll notice, Tucker, that I've got a veto round my waist," Marlow warned, "and the nerve to use the veto."

Rupert Tucker looked up alarmed.

"I—I didn't notice, Jack," he stammered. "Yes, yes, I see the belt. Now don't be foolish, Jack. You know you can't do a—"

Jack's pistols made a creaking sound as they were drawn from the leather holsters. Then the revolver hammers, thumbed deftly back, clicked ominously.

"They're my old Colts' guns," Jack specified. "Straightest shooting guns in the Northwest."

Tucker raised protesting white hands.

"Put the firearms down, Jack."

"Then take that porch stake out of my yard," Marlow commanded.

Buck Crossley was tapping the final spike of the link-up into its place, right at the ranch house doorstep, but his sledge blows weakened at the ring in Marlow's tone before he started to drive it home. Buck looked at his foreman in some doubt and perturbation.

"How about it, Tom?" Buck asked, groping for reassurance.

Foreman Tom Braddick in turn looked at the broadclothed lawyer.

"How about it, Tucker?" echoed Tom, taking good care to put the responsibility on the Turkey Trail solicitor.

"Don't be scared, navvy," Tucker cheered Buck Crossley. "Marlow's talking to me."

"And pointing at me," Buck asserted, his solemnity now intense.

Tucker made an authoritative gesture.

"You can't bluff me, Jack. Constable Milt Slade is coming right along. So—drive it, navvy."

Buck Crossley's sledge was upraised when both Jack's guns spoke. Jack's first shot broke Buck's sledge handle in the air, the hammer head flying wild. Jack's second shot spun the spike out of its starting position in the tie Buck stood upon. Buck yelled in pain, his words shrill in the blatant pistol echoes.

"Son of a gun, he's shot me," Buck bellowed. "No, it's the spike cut me. Right in the ankle. The girl grabbed his arm."

Jack Marlow was yelling loudly from the veranda edge at his daughter.

"Let go my arm, Muriel. Let go, I tell you."

A weaker yell came out of the living room, Mrs. Marlow's voice pitched almost to a shriek.

"Jack—Jack. Oh! my heart, Jack."

Then the ranch house door banged open and Aunt Flo was calling too.

"Alice has collapsed," she cried. "Her jumpy heart. That shooting and all. We'll have to get her to the Three Torches Hospital at once."

"Oh! Mother, mother," Muriel wailed.

"Alice—my Heavens!" breathed Jack.

Muriel was running back into the living room, bending down at her mother's side, using restoratives.

Jack started to follow Muriel, but the interrupting tattoo of Constable Milt Slade's horse beat against the window panes.

"Here's the Mounted at last," barked Rupert Tucker. "Too bad you fired, Jack. But don't worry so hard—Mrs. Marlow'll be all right once they get her to the new hospital. It's a good job it's handy."

Marlow was still making for the living room when Slade pulled Deerfoot up and nodded across the platform at him.

It was not a nod of recognition Slade gave.

Slade realized that he did not recognize Marlow, the man who had held him up, or who on the testimony of all good authority was supposed to have held him up, the man whom the Great Falls and Canada Railway had dispossessed, arbitrated out of his Double M holdings in Montana. The Great Falls and Canada had got the Marlow-Montana all right, but they had lost its value again within certain days when a lone bandit trussed up young mail clerk Hamilton Slade-Arliss and robbed the mail and express car of one hundred thousand dollars.

The lone bandit had escaped, running the border in spite of the Northwest Mounted Police, but sus-

picion spread that Jack Marlow had taken back his own.

Eight or nine years was quite a while to elude the law behind the security of a smoke-signal code of three fires burning always on Marlow's new Canadian ranch, so Slade had the strange feeling that he eyed Jack for the first time, as an entire stranger.

"Hold on, Marlow," he requested. "I'm sorry, but you're under arrest. Shooting with intent."



## CHAPTER XII:

JACK's friends, red and white, pushed up, Macdonald of the Glengarry, Sharples of the Winder, Macfarland of the Pioneer, Bright, La Grandeur, Thibandeau, Chief Red Crow and the other Indians.

"Intent, eh?" scoffed Macdonald.

"Come, come, Constable Slade," ridiculed Charlie Sharples.

"Jack's too good a shot," Joe Macfarland pointed out expertly.

"Yes, see him cut Buck's sledge handle in two?" Bright asked.

"And spin yon spike?" supplemented La Grandeur.

"Just target practice," grinned Thibandeau.

"The master of Three Touches has lived with us like a brother," Chief Red Crow asserted his allegiance. "His trouble is ours and his fight is our own."

"Also his camp fires do not darken while our fires burn," declared Chief North Axe significantly.

They shoved up closer, ready to interfere, but Jack waved them back.

"Stay out of it, Al," Marlow advised. "No mixing in, Chad. Thanks all the same, Joe. You too, Bright, La Grandeur, Thibandeau. And you, Red Crow, North Axe, with your young men, all my friends, I can take care of myself if you'll look after Alice and see her over to the hospital."

"Sure we will," volunteered Allen Bean MacDon-

ald. "I have my buckboard."

Jack stared at the Mounted man.

"Just a minute, Constable—"

"Slade; Milt Slade," the Redcoat rider introduced himself.

"Just a minute, Constable Slade. I have to go into the house. The wife has fainted."

"Not out of my sight," Slade decreed. "Along with me you may go into the house."

"Honest, Slade, I'll just—"

"Just stick right with me. I'll clean your guns for you, at that."

The Constable reached out and deftly unbuckled Jack's gunbelt. With the loss of it, Marlow came to his hard senses.

"What in condemnation have I done anyway?" he demanded. "Buck Crossley's ankle doesn't matter so much. But Alice—"

Court Baker had gripped his own pistol butts when his boss let loose, but discreetly shoved them out of sight now rather than have Slade appropriate them too. Court shook a reproachful head at Marlow.

"If you'd only let me call our range riders, Jack. Here they come now."

The clatter of hoofs and the clamor of belligerent yells vibrated the eaves as the T. N. T. hands loped into the yard. Jack apathetically motioned them away from the house.

"Too late, Staff; too late, boys," was his weak censure.

Court Baker exploded angrily.

"Time you boys left the lunch counter, feeding

your faces while they rip the ranch apart," he roared. "Where in thunder were you last night, Wylie, when you rode off the range?"

"Boss sent me into Three Torches town to get some heart medicine for Mrs. Marlow," snapped Staff.

"That's right, I did," admitted Jack. "Some digitalis medicine at the drugstore."

"Forget it, then," Court backed down. "But don't go stringing fences without orders, Staff. Lou Gates is laying for you."

"What's happened to the boss?" demanded Wylie blackly.

"Slade's taking him to jail. They've fainted Mrs. Marlow. Possessed the homestead."

"Now don't you accuse us that way, Court," cautioned Tucker.

"It's not new steel you're linking up, Tucker, it's a land steal," Court shot at him.

Marlow nodded grimly.

"Yes, Tucker, Court's said it, but don't imagine you can get away with it," Jack broke out. "Calgary-Macleod has gouged me."

"The Government put the line through; Sir John A. Macdonald's Government at Ottawa," Tucker disclaimed the responsibility. "You can't blame me."

"Yeh!" blazed Court Baker. "And who walked into Sir John A.'s office at Ottawa and gave him a glowing report on conditions here? Sam Steele was the man. A glowing report was Sam's. Customs house at St. Mary's for the border, influx of prairie schooners ploughing through, and a three hundred-mile

stretch of country north to Edmonton just dying for Pullman service."

"What has that got to do with it?" asked Tucker.

"'Old Tomorrow' Macdonald, to give him his truthful nickname, wouldn't have built," Court stated. "Jack Marlow would have been still sitting on his ranch house steps in the western moonlight, greasing his riding boots for the next day's ride."

"Never mind, Court," put in Jack, "maybe I'll get the value of the ranch back from the line."

Constable Slade cautioned him.

"Careful, Jack, that sounds like a threat," he admonished.

Court Baker boiled over.

"Take a threat from me, then, Slade," Court invited. "I'm a free man."

The Constable turned on him sharply.

"What threat, Court?" he inquired.

"There's a magistrate at Pincher Creek—Holt, and remember Magistrate Horace Holt sits at infantile Three Torches town, too. So we'll all be at new-born Three Torches courthouse after the trial."

"You will, eh?" challenged Slade.

"Yeh! and if Jack doesn't get suspended sentence from Magistrate Holt, we'll all lasso that flimsy brand new courthouse and yank it loose from its cedar post foundation. Isn't that right, Jack?"

"I wouldn't doubt it a bit," replied Marlow.

"Isn't that right, you T. N. T. wranglers?" Court demanded of the cowboys.

"Right," Staff Wylie's cowhands yelled.

"All right, I'm ready now, Constable," spoke Mar-

low in the echoes. "I think everything's been said. We'd better see about Alice."

Jack made for the doorway.

Constable Slade paused an instant as if to give the riders a word of warning, but thought better of it and joined Marlow.

"Where'd you get these guns so handy?" he asked Jack curiously.

"Off the elk horns," Marlow told him.

"Well—they'd better go back on the elk horns and be swabbed all bright and shiny," decided Slade.

With almost magical rapidity the Mounted man ran a swab through the guns and hung them on the varnished elk horns as they went by.

Following right on Jack's heels, Slade passed into the house.

Inside, Muriel and her aunt were working over Alice. Marlow, the aunt fanning fresh air on her from the open window, the girl handling the bottle of restoratives.

"My daughter Muriel—my sister Florence," Jack gave Slade the swift, simple introduction. "Is it serious, Muriel?"

"Mother's stirring," smiled Muriel courageously.

"It's the first good sign," breathed Aunt Flo.

"That's splendid," declared Constable Slade, smiling back and nodding genially at the two. "I'm up on first aid. Give the bottle to me."

### CHAPTER XIII.

SLADE took the bottle in a masterly way from Muriel's hand, his fingers, warm, strong, full of magnetism, touching hers for a second. He bent over Alice Marlow, marvelling at her beauty even in her faint as he lowered her head a little, raised her feet, applied the pungent salts to her nostrils.

Muriel's wonderfully lighted, observant eyes ran over him appraisingly. He seemed so sure of his necessary movements; so cool, so confident. His coming to the Three Northwest Torches ranch, although it hinted at a grim supervision, his entry into the living room, although it was linked significantly with her father's entrance, nevertheless gave her a sense of security.

"What about things outside?" she asked him. "Is it serious there?"

"Not so serious as it was," Slade assured her. "As Allen Bean Macdonald pointed out to me, there was no evidence of intent. Just some gun-play. I haven't written any charge into the records yet, but when I do, it will be 'discharging firearms in a public place.' So don't worry, Miss Muriel. It's not a question of jail. A summons from Magistrate Horace Holt will do the trick. Look at that—your mother's coming to."

"Is she fit to be moved right away to the hospital, Constable?" asked Aunt Flo.

"Now's the time," Slade decided. "Quick and

easy does it. Couch cushions and all."

Slade took one end of the couch cushions. Jack grasped the other end. Together they lifted Alice Marlow lightly, smoothly, backing away from the veranda where Macdonald had drawn up his buckboard.

Companions among the steel gang had hoisted Buck Crossley aboard the work train for repairs, but other navvies were driving the last spikes of the link-up, so that Macdonald's horses pranced.

Jack did not seem to notice, however, for he was smiling down on his wife with that inward spirit-flash of his and murmuring to her as they went along.

Alice's violet eyes fluttered and then opened on the Constable and Jack. Instantly her glance shifted to Jack's waist.

"Jack—those guns?" she breathed in recollection now that her senses cleared.

"Hanging on the porch wall, Alice," grinned Jack, with a grateful look at Slade. "Don't trouble about anything, dear. You're going to rest in a white cot for a day or two over yonder."

Jack nodded toward Three Torches townsite glimmering new in the sun.

Muriel's hand was on Slade's arm, pressing it to warn him.

"Mother mustn't know," she whispered to the Constable. "Please don't show that dad's—well, in bad."

"Sure not," the Constable promised her.

He smiled at Alice Marlow.

"The Mounted handing out first aid, Mrs. Marlow," he joked.

"Constable Slade, mother," Muriel introduced, conjuring up a laugh.

"Oh! Constable Slade," exclaimed Alice. "Yes, I've heard your name from Sergeant Joyce of Fort Stand Off down there."

"Great head, the Sergeant," laughed Slade. "But here's the buckboard. Macdonald's driving. So up you go, Mrs. Marlow."

They raised her, cushions and all, over the tail of the buckboard.

"There, you'll not be jarred in the back," Slade comforted her. "Muriel and her aunt can ride in front with Macdonald. Eh, Al?"

"Yes, of course," beamed Macdonald. "Lots of room, Muriel, Flo. Right up here."

Gallantly the Mounted man handed Aunt Flo, and then Muriel, to the seat beside Macdonald.

"Thanks for that," Muriel murmured, meaning more than the arm-up.

"Don't mention it," laughed Slade softly. "I'd do a darned sight more."

He looked into her eyes a little recklessly and waved a hand to her mother as Macdonald pulled out with a skilled hand on the lines, avoiding the spikers swinging their sledges and making his horses shy at every clank.

"See you at the hospital, Mrs. Marlow," Slade cheered her. "See you all there, I hope. Jack and I'll ride over."

Marlow gave him another grateful look.

"Yes, Alice," Jack yelled after them. "I'll saddle my favorite creamy bronc, Snowfall."



With Slade leading Deerfoot behind him, Marlow made for the big horse corral.

Court Baker watched them go, staring admiringly as the boss roped Snowfall with a single throw, saddled the cream broncho, all walnut spotted, with a one-handed swing of his forty-pound saddle, and mounted at the same moment that Slade crossed a leg over Deerfoot.

"Lou Gates said the Constable was a wizard of a citizen," Court observed to Staff Wylie, his glance following the two riders loping after the buckboard.

"How a wizard?" asked Staff.

"Lou said Slade was good at Mounted diplomacy, or whatever word's the brand for official action, judgment, tact, smartness—any of those things a Northwest man must have to stay in the business."

"Well, has he?" Wylie questioned.

"Lou guessed Slade was liable to make some saw-off," Court answered indirectly.

"You contend he's made it?" ventured Staff.

Court nodded convincingly.

"Lou hinted at a saw-off, all right," he declared cheerfully. "Looks like the Mounted boys gone and done it. You can lay quite a hefty bet on that, Staff. And you don't have to buy any chips to gain the knowledge, either."

"If you don't buy them, you can't cash them in," remarked Wylie composedly, "and there's no money in the game. But what's the matter with the range fires, Court? Somebody's monkeyed with them."

Court gazed out at the fires.

The three of them were burning normally when.

the buckboard passed by, also when Constable Slade and Jack Marlow rode after.

Now the cooking fire was out.

Only two of three Northwest torches cast their smokes into the stainless sky.

"Jack's given the nod to Peter the Greek as he rode along," Court interpreted. "That's the smoke signal Lou Gates asked for."

"Yes, Court, it means 'hurry back,' " Staff read the vaporous sign.

"That's what Lou will do, you bet," predicted the Three Northwest Torches foreman.

"You sure Lou'll get it?" the top rider inquired rather dubiously.

"Don't fool yourself, Staff," Court chuckled.

"I'll admit Lou has steered by smoke columns a powerful lot."

"Yeh! From any handy hill that guy can see to Texas. Lou'll hustle back."

"Hustled here, didn't he?" probed Wylie.

"Hell-fire fast. That's a symptom or omen or something. Likewise a warning, top rider."

Staff stared at him quizzically.

"Meaning—?" he began.

"If you two have a preliminary private feud, don't let it interfere with the main bout," Court laid down the severe injunction. "When Jack gave the nod to Peter the Greek, he calculated he'd need every man behind him, including Lou."

"Quite a compliment to pay to Milt Slade," commented Wylie. "Milt, I notice, is all alone."

"That's the way the Northwest Mounted always

work best—alone," Court growled. "They always get their man. Only it isn't always the same man."

"Oh! ain't it?" exclaimed Staff, a little startled, as if that were a new thought. "Anyway, all I wondered was, would Lou Gates get the word."

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## CHAPTER XIV.

Lou got the signal all right from the top of Lightning Hitch Hill on his run to Lethbridge, and from Lethbridge he made the return trip in record time, hours under his third day out.

Blazing sunset of that third day was silhouetting Court Baker's crowd of T. N. T. cowboys waiting round the Three Torches courthouse in the Valley, waiting for the verdict on Jack Marlow as Lou drove along the Valley Trail trying to force his way at a trot through the mob of idle spectators with his stage coach peak-loaded with baggage and passengers. His booming voice demanded right of way about every other minute and his whip cracked incessantly, timing off the split seconds, for suddenly he caught sight of Staff Wylie in Court's band and strained forward to challenge the top rider.

"You son of a hostler's apprentice, you," Lou bawled at Staff, rising in his seat as if to jump over the wheel and maul Wylie en route. "Maybe you'll turn blacksmith yet and shoe them for me before I pull out, you horse-switching ghost of Toe Cork Livery Stable. Lemme get hold of your gilt tusks and I'll—"

Court interrupted Lou's action, and speech and shoyed him right into his seat again over the wheel.

"Why, if it isn't our champion line-shover back," Court grinned into his exasperated face. "No, you

don't go and cripple Staff—yet. We'll need him for a while."

"How's that?" snarled Lou. "Hm! Even the crows don't need his ornery carcass."

"Didn't you go to the smoke sign school, Lou, and learn your three R's there? Read smoke, write smoke, figure by it?"

"When I wasn't playing hookey with them prairie-firing Peigans," admitted Lou. "They sure showed me a few flame wrinkles, at that."

"Well, cool down a spell, Lou, and talk that same horse sense to your horses. Maybe you'll get your cug."

"Whoa!" Lou shouted in the manner of a man who capitulated but momentarily. "You don't halt me with any hifalutin ruse, though, you snickering cowhands, that is—halt me long. Don't bank on breaking up my schedule same as Wylie. Confound them wheels, this mob's pushing so to skid them and my foot keeps slipping off the brake."

"Your foot isn't on the brake," laughed Court. "You got them both on the foot rail."

"So I see," coughed Lou, sprawling lengthily on the seat. "Nothing to stop the real old stage coach like pushing hard on the foot rail. You can always make trained wheelers sit down if you push hard enough. But what you holidaying cowboys mean, anyway, by blocking up my Lethbridge Trail?"

Court flung an expressive arm gesture in either direction, east and west.

"This section of the boulevard isn't the Lethbridge Trail any more, Lou," he explained. "It's Main

Street. Don't you see, that Rupert Tucker's Three Torches townlands boom's in full swing?"

The stage driver surveyed the evident house-building activity on all sides, activity which the drawn-out dispute between ranch and railroad had slowed up temporarily but had now accelerated with all possible speed.

"I see," nodded Lou. "Heard a word or two about it, too, as I skipped along."

"Yeh!" Court barked. "The Macleod-Calgary-Edmonton line's running sweet. All marked down in the records:—'Completed early fall, 1892.' Three Torches town dwellings popping up like a flock of mushrooms every night."

Lou embraced it, figuratively, with his whip.

"Looks like a goshawful boom," he diagnosed. "You know, I hardly listened to half the fairy stories people were spouting about full steam ahead. Yet seeing is believing, Court. Now I got an eyeful."

"Three Torches town spilling all over the open range already, Lou. Half a million dollars is the real estate value of Jack Marlow's old outer range that Cullen—well, stole."

Lou's face was invested with a sadness quite foreign to it.

"Where'd Aunt Flo Marlow and Muriel move to?" he demanded. "I see the gang's barred up the ranch house yard with their whitewashed cowcatchers. Cowcatchers, mind you. New kind that, on the T. N. T."

Court Baker pointed across the fresh sawdust and resinous lumber piles which littered the sides of Main Street and many cross streets according to the

survey plan of Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton.

"Into that little white cottage you can see from here," he told the stage driver. "That's theirs, down on River Street."

"Naming the old cowpaths already, you see," observed Staff Wylie significantly.

Lou was staring somewhat dumfounded at the tiny cottage in the bend of the Old Man River.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed. "That cottage? On River Street, eh? Pretty near postage stamp quarters after being used to riding so many Three Northwest Torch's Ranch acres."

Court nodded his agreement with that.

"Yeh!" he admitted, "but it's all they can afford. Muriel's working in the Toe Cork Hotel lunchroom the management opened in connection with the railway station. Handy, savvy?—almost adjoining. She's serving soup and things. My stars, Lou! My western stars! Cogitate on that, will you?"

Lou's expression of astonishment merged into one of consternation.

"Scuse me mentioning it at this point, Court, but I thought you and Muriel mebbe—well, might be hooked up together. In plain language, not profane or otherwise, might be married."

Court blushed under his tan.

"I never asked Muriel to marry me," he stated seriously. "Don't know that she thinks of marrying, even if I did ask. Anyway, a shaken-down, cleaned-out cowboy can't marry. This set-up is worse than poker. No open range, no riders, no money—that's the rotation, you know, Lou."

"Muriel had to get a job?"

"That's about the size of it. Shows what a bad fix Jack's in. Range gone. Round-up not marketed yet."

"Couldn't Jack get a loan to tide over like?"

"Banks wouldn't advance on the ranch, sections of the same being railroad lands."

"Loan on the herd, then?"

"Banks backed up there, too," Court explained. "Cattle just going off disputed property. Want to be sure of title and things."

"I guess Staff Wylie's ways wouldn't help that any," guessed Lou, ironically eyeing the top rider. "Too many strays."

In his turn, Staff jumped for Lou's perch, getting one foot on the wheel hub.

"Who? Me?" Staff bellowed. "Meaning I'd—"

Court Baker jerked Staff aside just as quickly as he had settled Lou.

"Quit it, Staff," he ordered.

He went on talking to Lou.

"As I intimated, Lou, independence is a good stiff heritage. Friends offered. Peigans offered. Even Cullen guaranteed to advance securities for any-size loan, but Muriel wouldn't have it. Muriel's bound to go on her own."

"And Mrs. Jack? They told me—"

"Yeh! Shock put her in the hospital. She's over there yet, past the cottage, away from the sound of this dangfangled new town hall bell they've belfried beside the courthouse. Hear it ringing? Supper hour, Lou. Sunset. Jack must be hungry by this confabbing in there with the law sharks and Magistrate Holt.



But he'll soon hear the verdict now. We're waiting ready."

Court moved round to the other side of his horse, whose trailing reins tied him to the ground nearby the stage coach. Staff Wylie took the hint and drew closer to his gray pony. Badger, standing with the range hands' bunch of spotted mounts. Lou Gates noted their expectant attitude and folded up his lines.

"I'll just put the brake on and wait, too," Lou decided. "Can't worm through this mob now."

The T. N. T. foreman laughed at Lou's patent blockade.

"Your outfit makes an awful rumpus in a building town, Lou," he chaffed. "She wouldn't make so much noise if you took the brass band off the foot rail."

Lou chuckled proudly.

"Thought of silvering her over, Court," he countered, "so's she could play solos. Lots of rhythm in the old cornet yet."

"How'd you manage to break your own time record on the Lethbridge run?"

"Just got to keep up with the times, Court. Train service now. Fast express. Have to speed connections."

"How much faster did you make it this time, Lou?" asked Court.

"Nigh a quarter-day," Lou confided proudly. "Allus a three-day hike. Cut her to two and three-quarters. Thought Jack's fracas might be all straightened out—or muddled up worse—by the time I got back."

"It should have been," Court told him. "Tucker kept delaying it till he could get the permits for the new buildings of this boom town blanketing the confiscated ranch land."

Lou sneered, and stared malignantly at the court house in the Valley.

"Making a sure job of it, eh?" he asked.

"You bet," nodded Court. "Don't know what in tarnation's holding them. The evidence—or some condemned substitute for evidence—was all in this afternoon, they told me in a farewell whisper when the dang courthouse got that hot in its fresh tar paper and piney clapboards that I had to recess a while and slosh round in the Toe Cork watering trough to cool off. Hades of a scorching, blistering autumn, this."

"Bad sign, heat so big so late," Lou read the omens. "Heat means restless range cattle, restless men—and women, if you ask me. It spells trouble ahead, stampedes, steer run-offs, gun fights and things."

Court Baker tapped his coat where he had slung his own guns into shoulder holsters in a manner unseen beneath his armpits.

"Can't have gun fights in the Macleod district any more," he grinned. "Sam Steele says so to Milt Slade and Milt Slade says so to us. Can't even wear guns any longer."

Again Court tapped the loose overhang of his coat in line with his armpits, and flung a flirt of his scornful fingers toward the unopened courthouse.

"Trial'll be over in two whisks of a broomtail's brush," he prophesied. "Yeh! Yonder's somebody coming out of the courthouse door now."

## CHAPTER XV.

THEY could hear the sound of the courthouse door banging back against the shiny, newly painted clapboards of the municipal building.

Lou Gate's mouth opened as wide as his stage coach door.

"Why, if it ain't Muriel and Aunt Flo," Lou blurted abruptly.

"Yes, and Muriel's crying," Staff Wylie pointed out in a sort of agitation, strange for him.

Muriel's sobbing, checked, spasmodic, almost stifled most of the time as she stepped out, came to them quite distinctly in the void of the clear Western air of the prairie evening.

"It's ridiculous, senseless," Muriel was denouncing. "It's outrageous—not within fifty miles of a fair and square decision."

Aunt Flo kept trying to comfort her, patting her hand, as her mother was accustomed to do, and putting an arm across her shoulders.

"There, there, Muriel, don't break down about it," Aunt Flo beseeched. "Westerners always ride it out."

Court gazed at them in amazement.

"Good grief!" he exploded. "Is it that bad? Magistrate Holt convicted him?"

Aunt Flo nodded severely.

"Six months," she informed him.

Muriel made little hysterical gestures in her intense indignation.

"Dad, mind you!" she cried. "First mother's shock, and then this."

Court broke out wrathfully.

"Don't you cry, Muriel," he begged. "It won't be six minutes. The T. N. T. boys'll loop their lariats round Constable Milt Slade's Mounted barracks and pull it open like a toy house. Eh, boys?"

"You're dead right, Court," Staff Wylie spoke up, and the rest joined in with a roar of approval.

Staff knew it was customary procedure for Commandant Steel to house prisoners in the Macleod barracks, and that sometimes the barracks were full, especially in the winter season, before he could get the opportunity to send them east to Winnipeg.

"But they're not taking dad to the barracks, Court," Muriel revealed.

Court looked at her in surprise.

"No Macleod detention?" he snapped. "How's that, Muriel?"

Aunt Flo answered for her.

"Rupert Tucker remembered you threatened to break the barracks open and free Jack," she stated.

Muriel enlarged on that information.

"Yes, Rupert got in touch with the Winnipeg authorities," she told Court. "Constable Milt Slade's taking dad there direct."

"That's bad, Muriel. When do they go?"

"Right away on the Overland train. Constable Slade's orders are from headquarters, swift, sure, explicit. He's giving dad time off only to eat a bite with him in the Toe Cork Lunchroom at the Three Torches Station."

Court considered the situation with a lightning switch of mind.

"And then your dad and Milt Slade are stepping right onto the Overland train for Winnipeg?" he demanded with something like ferocity.

Muriel had dried her eyes, and her fighting spirit seemed to catch a bit of Court's ferocity.

"Yes, Court, the Overland Express. It's due in just exactly fifteen minutes. I should be in the Toe Cork Lunchroom right now. I was to be back to work before this. I'm late as it is. But I—"

"Aren't they letting your dad say goodbye to you?" Court demanded savagely, in interruption. "Say goodbye to your Aunt Flo? To your mother in the Three Torches Hospital over yonder, Muriel?"

"The only chance I'll have to say goodbye to him will be when I serve his lunch," Muriel explained bitterly. "Aunt Flo and mother won't get a word with him at all. You see, Rupert Tucker's a relentless prosecutor when he tries good and hard."

Court's face darkened suddenly, like a thunder-head coming over the Kootenay Pass.

"Rupert Tucker ought to be scientifically ashamed of himself over that arrangement," Court denounced with a choice thunderclap or two of dazzling invective.

Lou Gates, who had been listening to it all, cut in to help.

"Make it a duet, Court," Lou rumbled. "Sartin sure Rupert Tucker should be hanging his head like a well-spanked coyote. This deal smells like Tucker's Turkey Trail frame-ups always smell."

Muriel appeared as if about to break down again at the warmth of their sympathy.

"I'm—I'm a little afraid I haven't the nerve to go back into the Toe Cork Lunchroom," she confessed. "It will hit me pretty hard to see dad go. Oh! Court, don't you see, it's almost physically impossible for me to serve his last lunch for six months."

Court's eyes flashed with emotion, looking straight into hers.

"Brace up, Muriel. You must go back into the Station restaurant. You must help. Staff Wylie's boys can't lasso a solid building like Three Torches Depot and drop a rope loop on heavy locomotives and roundhouses and things."

"What then?" asked Staff hopefully.

"I'll work it alone—inside," Court planned, "while your boys play up a big bluff outside. I'll get into the Toe Cork Lunchroom, too. Don't you people forget that Peter the Greek got a job along with Muriel in the Toe Cork Lunchroom when the T. N. T. homestead didn't need a cook any more."

"Sure, we were overlooking Peter," recalled Muriel, the hint of a smile breaking through at some humorous recollection of the ranch cook's shift to the Three Torches Station restaurant. "We can always count on Peter, you know. But how are you going to get into our stand, Court?"

"Can you slip me one of Peter's white coats and one of his white caps down there—waiter's outfit, you understand?"

"Yes, I can, Court. But—"

Court broke in on her objections impetuously,

commandingly, with undeniable finality.

"You toss me the white uniform to hide my chaps and I'll get in to the Toe Cork. Hurry. Jump onto your golden-skinned pony, Sun-up, there—it's in Staff's bunch. Aunt Flo can climb up with Lou Gates, and Lou will drive her on our heels to the Station."

"Sure thing," Lou bawled. "I'm going right there, anyway. Hop high up there, Aunt Flo."

Muriel seized the reins of her gilt-hided pony which Staff Wylie swung forward out of the bunch of saddled broncs belonging to his T. N. T. ranch hands awaiting either his sign or Court's to start trouble with anything and anybody.

Aunt Flo Marlow climbed over the stage coach wheel and perched beside Lou.

In the distance, to the west, back over the Old Man River, sounded the flutty whistle of the Overland Express.

Court listened and instantly interpreted the siren sound to the others.

"The Overland. Whistling for the watertank at Lone Coulee. Only ten miles away, folks. Get busy."

There came the creak of the stage coach's crunching wheels turning around, and Lou's voice demanding passage again after his halt.

"Open me a road, Court," he implored. "Gotta beat the Constable down to the Station."

Court waved an arm at Staff Wylie and the T. N. T. wranglers.

"Come on, cowhands," Court cried. "Lope for the Station pronto. Wait outside there. I'm going inside,

as I intimated a spell back."

Court's orders rang shrilly, but even then his final word was lost in the tattoo of horses' hoofs making for the depôt and in the hum of Lou Gates' stage coach, its wooden body vibrating like a drum, as Lou lashed on after Court on Soapy and Muriel on Sun-up, dusting the prairie landscape with the smoke of their going.



## CHAPTER XVI.

ACROSS the Three Torches Station platform in front of the Toe Cork Lunchroom sounded the rattle of baggage trucks, the ringing of engine gongs, the last-word messages of friends and passengers waiting for the Overland's arrival.

Through the busy crowd, as the T. N. T. riders rode up to the platform, the blue-uniformed train caller, Danny Moss, was dodging briskly, genially waying puzzled people to their right tracks.

"Show your tickets, please," chanted Danny as if he were directing traffic in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto or Montreal. "Main Line Track's right here—and don't mix it with the three switches. Overla-a-and! Overla-a-and Express. Going to Winnipeg and points East. Due in ten minutes."

The T. N. T. riders pulled up, their horses' trampling smothering Danny's shrill final note.

Lou Gates' stage coach swirled round to the platform edge, blanketing Danny's echoes answering him from station walls and roundhouses.

Court whispered to Lou as he dismounted:

"Leave your stage coach where she is, Lou, at the platform edge. Be ready to give your blacks the whip."

"But what's your skin game for Jack's escape, Court?" the stage driver growled softly.

"I'll get Jack away from Constable Milt Slade in the Toe Cork Lunchroom, Lou. We'll hide him in your stage coach. The T. N. T. boys'll ride off as if

they've got Jack in their bunch of broncs, high-tailing it for the Porcupine Hills over yonder. Then, when they're being followed—as they sure will be followed—you beat it with Jack for your next mail delivery. Savvy?"

Lou nodded grimly.

"Savvy sure, Court."

"And no confessions after about a mistake?" Court cautioned.

"Not a condemned absolvment," the stage driver vowed solemnly. "All O.K. with me. I'll keep my wagon wheels cramped a bit on the off side, outward from the platform edge, for a quick turn. See? Soon's I've dropped this mail for the Overland, I'm done here. Lethbridge mail. Goes quicker this way. Turkey Trail Narrow Gauge is liable to take a fortnight."

Lou yelled at the baggage trucker, Art Simms, who always put the mail bags aboard.

"Hi! Art!"

Art Simm's hand truck rumbling by, stopped with a screech.

"Hustle, Lou," Art implored. "I got to dump all this dasted junk at the Main Line in a jiffy. What else you piling onto me?"

"Overland mail bags here, Art."

Lou tossed them with a thump onto the peak of Art's truckload.

"Moses!" groaned Art. "Who do you think I am, Lou,—Sandow, the strong man?"

Court whispered once more to Lou.

"Don't throw away all your bags, Lou," he begged.

"We must have something to cover Jack Marlow in

your stage—shield him from the bright eyes of the Mounted."

Lou smiled reassuringly.

"My old wagon's full of bags," he boasted. "Toting those blasted mailed samples from the East, those Prairie Rose soap boxes like I handed Muriel last trip."

"I know," recalled Court, a shade of tenderness softening his grim face.

"Bags of them still I've got to deliver," Lou figured mournfully. "Take me till Spring, I reckon, to do the soap job. They're just the thing to cover Jack. And the Mounties will sure never smell him out in all that scent, do you think, Court?"

"I think not," laughed Court, in spite of an undeniably increasing tension. "But you haven't a loose cake of Prairie Rose in your pocket, have you, Lou? A cake you can donate to me?"

"Yes, I have," Lou replied. "Always carry one. Great to get the hub grease off. And it's plumb soothing to my sun-burned hands on the lines. Here's the cake."

Lou passed it over, grinning widely at his own jokes.

Court slapped it smartly in his palm and sniffed its wild rose perfume.

"Thanks, Dave," he breathed ecstatically.

"What you want it for, Court?" asked Lou, now full of curiosity. "Really want it for, I mean?"

"For eye wash," Court told him. "A man can't see a thing at all when suds are shunted into his eyes. But where's Muriel?"

The sound of the Toe Cork Lunchroom door opening abruptly told him.

Muriel's voice came through the doorway, calling back to him.

"Here I am, Court, going in."

"Got my *laundry*, Muriel?" yelled Court.

"Sure, Court," she shouted. "Right here in the bag."

"That's O.K., then," Court shouted. "Where's your Aunt Flo?"

Aunt Flo's feet at that moment were tapping the switch tracks as she crossed over them.

"Here I am, Court," Aunt Flo announced. "At the Main Line Track."

"Fine—hold that pose, Aunt Flo," Court enthused softly for her benefit alone. "Like as if you're there to say goodbye to Jack."

He turned to the T.-N. T. riders.

"All the cowboys here with us?" he inquired.

They took stock, with a stirring of hoofs, a jingling of spurs, a creaking of saddles.

"Every man-jack of us."

"The whole caboodle."

"Round-up outfit—and that's all hands."

The comments came in chorus, Staff Wylie post-scripting the bunch.

"Conspicuous, us, Court," Staff haw-hawed. "All mounted. What's next?"

"You all ride hell-for-leather," Court ordered, "when Lou Gates' whip cracks as the signal."

The cowboys spoke again in chorus.

"Yeah! Ride like blazes."

"Heeling only the high spots."

"Course, but ride how far? Settle that before we wind or kill the ponies."

Staff Wylie interposed before Court could tell them their limit.

"Look, Court, Jack's got to change costume if he gets loose," Staff reminded him. "And soon's he gets loose at that. He can't fade out without his outfit. I'll go back to the ranch and pick up his gear bag and a horse he hasn't never ridden in his life—that mule-eared buckskin Biter would about fit. The Mounties won't find any such description of a wanted man-and-horse in their little red notebooks."

"That's the medicine, Staff," agreed Court. "My memory must be slipping cogs. Go and get Jack's old clothes and that buckskin Biter. Wait with them down by Lone Coulee yonder in the shadow of the watertank. That's as far as Lou Gates goes west with the stage, and it'll look all right."

Staff dug in spurs, wheeled and started, snappy as a pistol shot.

"And how far do we ride?" the bunch asked Court again.

"Far as you like," Court told them. "Ride all night if Constable Milt Slade follows you that long."

"How you know the Constable's going to follow us, Court?" propounded one of the cowhands.

"I'm going to make him," Court declared. "Here comes Milt Slade now with the prisoner, and you boys can snatch Jack's creamy bronc Snowfall while they eat."

"O. K." they laughed. "Snowfall's well marked.

Easy spotted as Jack's horse in our remuda."

Court was staring at Milt Slade and his prisoner as both men dismounted.

"They dismount like a pair of Siamese twins," Court sneered. "And they walk like that, boys—pressed darned close together."

The T. N. T. hands stared also, their faces blackening with sudden anger, a growl of protest rising here and there in the mounted group.

"You better let one of us gun it out with Constable Milt Slade, eh, Court?" they suggested with a snarl.

Court shook his head decisively.

"Stay put, boys," he commanded. "Milt's got Jack's right wrist handcuffed to his own left wrist. Taking no chances of losing his man, you savvy?"

The T. N. T. riders cursed ominously.

"Blackguard shame," they chorused, "to see the boss roped and tied."

Jack Marlow looked across the station platform at his own men.

"Hello, boys," he nodded. "Hardly recognize your old boss in custody, would you?"

The group of riders gave a surge forward, but Court held up a warning hand.

"Steady, cowboys," he admonished. "Don't rush things or you'll spoil Jack's farewell luncheon in Three Torches Town."

The cursing of the cowboys grew louder.

"Any one of us can wipe the station platform with the Constable, gun and all," they growled.

The click of Constable Milt Slade's military boots

and the stamp of Jack Marlow's riding heels echoed from the planks.

Milt spoke coolly to the angry T. N. T. riders.

"Don't like gun play," Milt observed. "Only I have to do this and get my man to Winnipeg. You can see that Jack's handcuffed to me. I'll shoot the first man that monkeys with him."

They all heard the businesslike leather swish of the Constable's holster as he drew his pistol. Sharp and determined-like came the sound of his hammer cocking.

Lou Gates, waiting with the stage coach, laughed as if at a novel sight.

Lou's laugh was a little sarcastic, his voice more sarcastic still.

"First time I ever seen you pull a gun on anybody, Milt," he remarked.

"First time might be last time—for somebody," Jack Marlow warned them. "Don't try to interfere with the law that way."

The shout of train caller rose once more.

"Show your tickets, please," Danny sang out. "Main Line Track. Overland Express. Right on time. Due in five minutes."

Constable Slade looked at the train slate on the side of the station wall.

"Five minutes," he told his prisoner. "Only time enough for a cup of coffee and a sandwich. Hurry, will you, Jack?"

"Yes, coffee and sandwiches and a minute to say goodbye to Muriel in there," Jack replied.

The Toe Cork Lunchroom door opened to their

push and closed behind them.

Court Baker smiled meaningly at the door slam.

"They're in," he announced. "Jack's final bite in Three Torches."

His cowhand group shifted irritably.

"How you figure that, Court?" they wanted to know.

"Because I'm serving it," Court assured them. "So stand ready, everybody. I'm going in the kitchen door of that restaurant."

Court opened the kitchen door.

The rattle of utensils inside sounded like a tinny band.

The closing door muted the discord.

Lou Gates from his stage seat could look right into the Toe Cork Lunchroom.

"Court's in," Lou told the others. "The Constable never thought of that kitchen door. He's all for watching the front entrance of the Toe Cork restaurant. I can see Muriel in the kitchen, too. You see her there inside the doorway, boys?"

The T. N. T. outfit, sitting their horses, could see Muriel also.

"Yeah!" they commented. "What's Muriel doing in there? What's the white linen she's handing out to Court? There's Peter the Greek, too—our old cook. Seems to be Peter's spare linen, the way he's joking over it. What name, Lou?"

Lou laughed at the humorous antics of Peter the Greek.

"That's Peter's fresh laundry," Lou explained. "He's lending it to Court, at Muriel's request. Hir-



ing on another waiter."

"Disguise?" guessed the cowhand group, watching the kitchen performance keenly.

Lou Gates nodded.

"Waiter's uniform," he chuckled. "No better passport. By the great riding rodeos, boys, look out! Something's going to break any second now. Get set for it."

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## CHAPTER XVII.

THE Overland Express whistled in the distance, much nearer than before, its echoes penetrating into the Toe Cork Lunchroom and mingling in Court's ears with the drone of the coffee urn and the bubbling of the soup pot, all punctuated by the silver-ringing of the call-bell summoning a waiter to the tables inside.

Although their voices could not be heard inside in these sounds, Peter the Greek, Muriel and Court, whispered together.

"Quick, Court, here's the white coat," Muriel hurried him along.

"And my cap, Court," grinned Peter the Greek. "I shook her well and stamped the most of them. So you wouldn't itch any."

"Hurry, Court," Muriel begged. "You've got me all panicked. Constable Slade's pushing the clapper of that bell. He's sitting down with dad. I've got to go now and answer his bell. Are you ready?"

"Sure, Muriel; sure Court's ready," Peter soothed her.

Court's big shoulders were bulging the white coat belonging to Peter, crackling the fresh, stiff starch.

"Yeh! I'm into it," Court rumbled, twisting his muscled neck to the rasp of the collar. "But these darn buttons."

"I'll light the lights," proposed Muriel, fretting to get her fingers employed at something that might ease the tension of her nerves.

"No, don't wink up any lights, Muriel," Court

vetoed. "Don't want Constable Milt to see too well in there. There, the snowy coat fits. Apron hides my chaps. The lousy cap shades my dead giveaway eyes. Hand me the hot coffee, will you? It was coffee and sandwiches the Constable spoke of. Where's a finger bowl? I just got to have a finger bowl."

Muriel grabbed one.

"Here's your finger bowl, Court. Water in it, too."

"What you want with it, Court?" inquired Peter curiously. "Don't put my coffee into the finger bowl. You'll disgrace me. You'll start a boycott on our Toe Cork Lunch."

"Don't worry, Peter," laughed Court. "I'll swish my Prairie Rose soap in it."

Court's huge hand made a sloshing tumult in the soapy water.

"Doing the crawl stroke," he mimicked.

"Goodness!—look at the suds," exclaimed Muriel, dancing on her toes in her excitement.

Court's laugh grew grimmer.

"A great eyewash," he praised his own handiwork.

"When I drop the hot coffee, Muriel, you bump Constable Slade in passing and I'll do the finger bowl stuff."

Muriel giggled nervously.

"I'll do that, Court," she promised. "I'm a brand-new and awful clumsy waitress, you must remember."

"You're sure Milt will unlock those cussed handcuffs?" Court asked dubiously. "Pretty slow if I have to break or file them off. The Constable will recognize me while I'm at it, into the bargain."

"Oh! he'll have to unlock them to let dad eat and

drink," she declared. "There, the Constable's calling."

Milt Slade evidently didn't trust the bell against time.

"Waiter—waiter," Milt yelled. "Two cups of coffee and half a dozen sandwiches. Jack and I have got only three minutes."

In the regulation Toe-Cork-Hotel dining room adjoining the French-Canadian waitress Annette Royale, who had been coaching her protégée Muriel on the side, these busy restaurant opening days, looked up from her water glass polishing with a silken scarf she had found much better than any linen napkin, and started through to lend a hand.

"Stay where you are, Annette," the Constable's commanding voice halted her in her tracks. "No strangers serving this lunch. And you aren't so strange at that—but routine, you understand? Very sorry, Annette."

Annette shrugged her vivacious French shoulders and screwed up her pretty face in justifiable indignation.

"My faith!" she snapped in protest. "And in my own dining room. You Mounties order me to do or not to do—"

"Yes," Milt nodded. "Stay there two minutes and a half and you can have the whole lunchroom and dining room to yourself, Annette, you lovely little Parisienne."

"Lovely!" echoed Annette raptly.

She turned her head and stole a glance at herself in the buffet mirror.

"You should teach Toad Foster to say it that way, Monsieur Le Constable Slade," she smiled mischievously.

In the kitchen Court and Muriel interpreted the swift fencing passage between the Constable and Annette.

"Milt's looking everywhere for trouble," Court growled softly. "So step right in there, Muriel. Sing out to me for the coffee. And you, Peter, strike up the band. Hoot one of your opera songs, Peter. It'll help cover up any clamor that might ordinarily arise."

Obediently, and with joyful alacrity, Peter struck into his splendid tenor, far too good for yodelling days on Three Northwest Torches Ranch, raising the station house roof.

Muriel's footsteps echoed in the lunch together with the scraping of chairs drawn up to the tables. Muriel's voice answered the Mounted man's impatient calls.

"All right, Constable Slade," she soothed him, "the waiter's bringing it. But dad's hands? These bracelets? You'll have to unlock them, of course, or else he can't—"

Milt Slade seemed to remember all at once that Jack was so handicapped.

"Of course, yes, of course," Milt apologized. "While Jack eats. I have the key right here."

The key made an almost inaudible click in the handcuffs.

"But no funny work, Jack—mind, I'll lay my gun at my plate, there, on the table, ready for business,

and I'll sit just so—facing the entrance."

Milt's service revolver made an ominous thump on the lunch table.

Jack Marlow's voice rose sharply in a sort of protest.

"We're alone, anyway, aren't we, Constable?" he demanded.

"That's the way I want it," the Constable replied. "Remember, Muriel, nobody comes through that front doorway till we're gone."

Muriel could hardly keep her grip on her nerves and began to snifle.

"Dad—dad," she faltered. "Oh! Constable, you won't mind if I kiss him goodbye?"

Milt Slade's eyes lightened admiringly. Her snuffle distressed him more than he cared to admit at the moment.

"That's all right, Muriel. Go ahead. I know how you feel. Don't think it's pleasant for me, either. Only I'm bound to do my duty. Jump up and kiss her, Jack, quick—and I wish to Heaven I were in your place."

Jack made a significant rumpus getting out of his chair.

Muriel took a step or two and threw her arms about her father's shoulders.

The real, honest-to-goodness smack of their kiss echoed in the luncheon end of the station building, echoed and clung with an after-sigh.

Muriel whispered as she sighed.

"Be ready to make a break, dad. The waiter coming is Court."

Jack drew a quick, anxious intake of breath at the chance.

"Court?" he murmured faintly. "In the white coat and cap. I knew Court would plan something slick before I boarded the train."

Jack's voice went up to normal volume, vibrant, and strong.

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"Well, goodbye awhile, Muriel," he boomed. "And where in the world is your Aunt Flo?"

Jack was playing it out, parting and all, for the Mounted man's benefit.

"Aunt Flo's waiting out there at the Main Line Track to say goodbye to you, too, dad," she told him.

"See her there, then, sure," Jack cried with a note of cheerfulness.

Jack released Muriel slowly and got into his chair again at the lunch table.

Constable Slade smiled with some inner tender thought at the embrace.

"Now hustle that coffee," he pleaded. "Hustle, Muriel. We've got only two minutes left."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

MURIEL called loudly to the kitchen end of the lunch quarters.

"Waiter," she cried, "waiter! Rush that order here. Oh! yes, there you come at last with the coffee and sandwiches on your tray, eh?"

The swing doors swished. Court's starched coat crinkled and snapped as he came through. The coffee cups rattled on his tray.

"Sorry, gentlemen," Court apologized, changing his voice into a rumbling English accent which he was a good hand at mimicking. "The coffee urn wasn't hot enough. I had to wait a little, but it's piping hot now, sirs."

Muriel yelled a warning at his awkward haste in serving.

"Look out," she exclaimed, "look out! You're upsetting the table. You're spilling the coffee, too. There it goes!"

The lunch table crashed down to Court's swift, secret knee push.

The coffee cups crashed off the tray as he slanted the tray into Constable Slade's lap where he sat so hungrily.

The bump of Milt's gun thumped with a resounding metallic clink across the floor in the debris of the coffee cups.

The Constable exploded into crisp speech.

"Heavens! hold hard, waiter. You've handed me out a scalding."



Muriel shoved Court so that he lurched against the Mounted man.

"There, you've upset the table," she chastised him. "Dropped the coffee square on his bare hands."

The pseudo-waiter stammered, regrets.

"I was coming too fast, I—I—"

"Cold water—quick," the Constable interrupted. "Best thing for scalds."

Muriel grabbed the finger bowl.

"Here's a bowl," she offered.

She turned, collided with Milt, and the finger bowl followed the coffee cups, flying high through the air.

It was the pseudo-waiter's turn to protest and to criticize.

"You're as clumsy as I am, Miss," he observed. "You spilled the finger bowl's contents into his eyes. The Constable can't see a thing."

Milt Slade, his eyes screwed up tightly, was shaking hands and head.

"Fingers and eyes," he snarled. "Heavens! What was in that finger bowl?"

"Soap suds," gasped Muriel. "Prairie Rose, as I live. Now how in all creation did that get there?"

The scrape of Jack Marlow's boots as he discarded his chair made Constable Milt Slade whirl about.

"Stand still, Jack," he ordered. "Don't try getting away. I have my foot on my gun."

Jack laughed derisively.

"So you have, Constable, but you can't shoot blind, you know."

"Don't be too sure I can't. My left hand's not so

bad. And I sure can block the front entrance till help comes."

The Constable sprang to the front doorway, instinctive and true in his direction, felt for the jambs and blocked the space with his wide shoulders.

While he sprang, Jack and Court, in his waiter's disguise, jumped the opposite way, diving between the swing doors of the kitchen, and vanished from the lunch quarters.

In the lunch room, empty but for Muriel and Milt, the hammer of the Mounted man's pistol clicked as he raised the weapon.

"Don't shoot wild, Milt," cried Muriel, using his first name in her excitement.

The Constable's first blind shot rang out in the lunch quarters.

"Quit it—quit, Milt," Muriel appealed.

He fired again, three times, the bullets spattering the swing doors which he had heard swish shut.

In the kitchen out there Peter's aria stopped suddenly on a high pitch, and a ki-yi yell of alarm burst from the Greek's brown robust throat as a bullet glanced from the swing doors and pierced his array of pans on the kitchen wall. He bent low away from the flying lead, and silently beckoned Court and Jack into the shelter of the garbage outlet alley.

Muriel was still yelling in frightened tones inside the lunch room.

"Quit it, Milt, I say," she beseeched. "There's nobody here but ourselves. Wait—I'll light up. Your eyes, you know."

Muriel's match crackled. The light glowed. At the

same moment the train whistle blasted the station. The gong rang raucously as the engine puffed past. The headlight, already burning for the eastern run, flooded through the panes and glared on Muriel and the Mounted man inside.

Milt felt the brilliance. It lighted up his vision suddenly although his eyelids were tightly closed.

"Thunderation! Muriel," he exclaimed. "That light's worse than soap suds on one's eyeballs."

The train pulled its whole length into the station and stopped with a shriek of brakes.

Train caller Danny Moss's summons became very peremptory.

"Hurry up, please—hurry up. Show your tickets, will you? The Overland Express for Winnipeg. Leaving now."

Milt Slade turned in the front doorway and stumbled out on the run, rubbing some of the suds from his eyes so that at last he could partially see what was ahead of him. He made first for the train, but wheeled at the spattering sound of horses' hoofs thundering past and away over the prairie. He glimpsed the close-packed bunch of T. N. T. riders tearing off, marked the creamy hide of Jack Marlow's Snowfall in their midst, and instantly guessed that Jack was galloping free in their ranks.

He ran for his own mustang Deerfoot, passing Danny Moss. Danny gave him a sharp glance and wondered at the soap streaks down his tanned cheeks and chin.

"What's the matter, Constable?" Danny asked, com-

ing all alert as he sensed something disastrous in the air. "And was that you shooting? The gong blanked the cracks, but I thought, maybe, I th—"

"Yes," Milt snapped. "My prisoner got away from me. Condemned accident at lunch. Soap suds in a finger bowl and I got it in my eyes, of course."

The voice of Conductor Charlie Baird called from the train steps on the Main Line platform right behind them.

"All aboard—all aboard!" Charlie warned.

Aunt Flo Marlow was waiting there at the train steps, too, and she could not suppress a little whisper of exultation.

"Thank God, he isn't," she murmured to herself.

Conductor Charlie Baird overheard her soft comment and turned about with his genial laugh and joke known up and down the Line.

"Who isn't?" Charlie demanded. "I'll bet you're married, lady."

Aunt Flo giggled somewhat hysterically.

"No, not married," she replied. "Did you ever hear the like of that, Lou?"

It was the stage driver, hopping across the station platform for his mail bags.

"Then you're lucky, lady," the Conductor told her, "not being married, I mean. Oh! hello, Lou. Another load of letters, eh?"

Lou grinned in friendly fashion at his opposition in the transportation business.

"You're the funniest con I know, Charlie," Lou beamed, "and the fattest. Don't mind him, Aunt Flo. He's a lonely old bachelor himself, forever preaching

the gospel of 'Go West, young girls, go West.' "

"Come, come, Lou," bantered Charlie, clapping him on the shoulder, "pick up your mail bags and let us be on our way."

"Yes, your way and my way," Lou conceded, "and I don't doubt but I'll beat you to Coyote Crossing yet."

Lou crossed back to his stage coach with the mail bags.

The train started, its Overland pulling power warming it up fast.

Conductor Charlie Baird waved a fat white hand in goodbye.

"So long, Lou. Aboard, everybody. Aboard."

As Aunt Flo turned after Lou, Court and Jack Marlow flitted like shadows out of the garbage alley outlet on the other side of the station, drifting unseen towards the stage coach where it waited nearby.

Lou Gates flourished his sombrero in a flagging motion.

"Gosh golly, Aunt Flo," he burst out, "they sure have made it somehow. Those shots and Peter the Greek's yowl in the middle of that Metropolitan Opera rendition of his, quaked me for one dizzy minute. But don't worry, I'll pull out of it. I've had those spells before now—hold-ups and ambushing Injun war parties and such trifling trail incidents."

"I hope the Constable hasn't winged Peter," Aunt Flo breathed. "My stars, we have one heart patient in the hospital already and I'm liable to make another."

Lou grinned at her.

"Heart, eh, Aunt Flo?" he chuckled. "With your chest and hips? The only thing they'd put you in the hospital for is a diet."

## CHAPTER XIX.

AUNT FLO joined in Lou's laugh, thrilled at the escape of her brother.

"It's great to see Jack loose," she exulted, "and up to us to see that he stays loose. Here he is now, with Court. What's Court done with the waiter's uniform?"

Lou guffawed again.

"Court dropped it in the kitchen," he surmised. "Court ain't a waiter any more. He's a T. N. T. cowboy now."

The two shadows joined Aunt Flo and Lou by the innocently waiting stage coach taking on its Overland mail bags as usual.

Court pulled the coach door open.

"Dive in, Jack," Court urged quietly. "You pull out pronto, Lou."

"Yep," promised Lou coolly. "Here, duck under them Prairie Rose soap boxes in the back, yonder, Jack—hull avalanche of them. You're plumb out of sight there. That's it. Feel smothered at all?"

"No, fine and dandy," Jack murmured. "I'm O.K."

"Staff Wylie's gone to get your outfit, Jack—change of clothes, gear, food, that buckskin Biter, everything you'll need, not forgetting the old guns off the elk horns," Court mapped his boss's immediate future. "Staff'll meet you and Lou at Coyote Crossing. After that you're on your own. But I guess we all know where we can find you without advertising in the Three Torches Town paper *Western Star*."

"Yes, I'll lie low in the Indian camps on the reserves till we get a chance to drive my herd of cattle south of the border to my old Montana-Marlow country," Jack told them. "Chief North Axe and Chief Red Crow will look after me and provide more of their young men for extra T. N. T. hands on the drive. Believe me, we'll need those young bucks in that Bear's Paw Mountain country where we have to slip the steers through the Crows and the Gros Ventres."

"Them red devils will be waiting, don't you doubt," nodded Lou Gates. "The word's gone out. Crows and Gros Ventres ain't missing their chance for beef and scalps."

Court snickered and added a rider to Lou's cheerful prognostications.

"Yep! And no Mounties to protect your cattle once you're over the United States border, Jack," he sarcastically reminded the boss.

"Everything's clear, then," decided Jack, "and if the search gets hot on the reserves, I figure I can gravitate safely between North Axe's and Red Crow's camps. So goodbye, Flo, and you and Muriel watch out for word from me."

"Goodbye, Jack," his sister choked. "A teeny kiss won't hurt—just in case."

Flo Marlow kissed him awkwardly, his head almost buried under the soap boxes.

Court shut the stage door.

Lou was on the high driver's seat already, his whip cracking like a revolver shot as he sent his cramped-



out wheels rolling and pulled off on the Coyote Crossing trail.

As the stage vacated the platform, the thunder of the T. N. T. horses' hoofs, rounding the prairie strip back of the station, beat up like a dozen drums. The T. N. T. riders, whom Constable Milt Slade had dimly glimpsed starting away, swerved in their course to pick up Court Baker.

"Hi-yi," they shrilled. "Straddle and ride, cowboy."

"Great, boys, just great," Court eulogized them. "I'm right with you in the round-up and the rodeo. Here's my darned old roan, and he isn't any Strawberry Roan, either. Soapy's sure too white. Sticks out on every prairie landscape like a white elkskin tepee. I could paint you Strawberry, though, Soapy. Or sing you a song about your brother broncho. Listen—"

"You ain't tight, are you, Court?" asked the cowboys anxiously, spinning their mounts for the real break-away.

"Sober as Magistrate Holt on the bench," Court vowed.

He proved it by vaulting into his saddle without touching Soapy's stirrup.

"But what's the matter with the old Three Northwest Torches Range fires?" he asked suddenly, as he straightened up on the roan's back.

He pointed into the evening gloom which had followed the sunset and which banked quite dark against the Porcupine Hills thirty-five miles away from them.

"Heck! I know," Court interpreted. "Staff Wylie's home on the range, all right. Staff's got the buckskin-

and the bag and all, and monkeyed with the fires. One out when we left, you remember?"

"Yeah!" they recollected. "We remember. A couple still burning then."

"But not now," Court made it plain to them.

He waved a hand toward the Peigan and the Blood Indian Reserves over to his left.

"Staff's sent out the word to North Axe and to Red Crow," he figured. "They'll be on the lookout for Jack, ready to throw a blanket over him and sit upon it gravely smoking when the Mounted rides by on patrol."

Then Court grew oddly serious, eyeing the single fire gleaming like a red torchlight on the T. N. T. grazing grass.

"One isn't so bad," he mused. "Two is condemned risky. We got to watch our step now, cowboys, or the glow goes out for good on Jack's old homestead and on his life. Always been an omen, you savvy? That's all for now. Ride!"

While they galloped into the night, Constable Milt Slade came running down the station platform, hunting his own horse Deerfoot.

Danny Moss, the train caller, not knowing much else what to do, was running with him.

Danny wiped his sleeve over the train slate hanging on the station wall as he ran, deftly obliterating the chalked figures thereon.

"The Overland Express—is off the board—running right on time," he chanted in his run, fair warning to a late passenger or two not to try to catch it.

"Danny," barked the Constable, "wire ahead and

have Conductor Charlie Baird search that train before it stops at Coyote Crossing."

"What for?" asked Danny.

"For my prisoner, Jack Marlow, you nit-wit," roared Milt. "I told you he escaped. But not for long. Only two places he can be."

"What two?" asked Danny.

"Jack's either on that train or in the middle of that bunch of T. N. T. hands riding hell-for-leather and the Porcupines."

"You're sure?" the train caller ventured rather dubiously. "I didn't pass anybody without a ticket."

"Certain," Milt declared. "Only two places for a quick getaway. Nowhere else to vanish. So you wire ahead and have the Overland searched at the Coyote Crossing stop. I'll follow those high-tailing T. N. T. riders."

Danny Moss nodded briskly.

"All right, I'll tell the station operator right away."

Danny's raced for the operator's key in the office.

Milt sprang for his mustang's back.

"Darn you, Deerfoot, I'll catch that tinhorn bunch of bronc riders or break your neck."

## CHAPTER XX.

THE sound of his galloping T. N. T. riders' horses was sweet music in Court Baker's ears as they skimmed the open prairie beyond the lines Chief Lands Surveyor Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton of the Canadian Pacific Railway had run and staked as the limits of Three Torches Town, coming metropolis of the Old Man River district, which merged grass hills and riding men, and sometimes night-shifted herds, with Montana country just over the border.

Far off to Court's right, to the eastward, the whistle of the Overland, making time for Coyote Crossing, echoed faintly now.

Court drew a big breath of relief, inflating his lungs with the dry range air that blew from off the grazing grounds scented with the many mingled odors he liked so well, the reek of steers, the tang of alkali dust, the fragrance of camp smoke, the intermittent pungent sniffs of tobacco drifting by.

"Whoopee—yipeee!" Court exulted at the smooth way things had worked out for his bold essay of baiting Constable Hamilton Slade-Arliss, known for short as Milt Slade, N. W. M. P.

"Feeling good, Court?" his T. N. T. cowpunchers grinned.

"Yep," Court admitted. "It's great to be out in the open again after confining towns like Three Torches. Don't see how you boys are going to stand the city life hereabouts."

"What city life?" they gulped. "Us? We're riding

the old Marlow-Montana way soon's the herd goes. Montana scenery sure looks fine to us after staring these sawdust and lumber piles around town in the face for fifteen or twenty minutes by the Three Torches Town clock."

"You homesick Rio Granders," Court teased them. "But I don't blame you. The singing wind on your saddle horn sure feels majestic."

"Pretty plumb dark, through," hazarded one of the bunch, the one who led Jack Marlow's riderless cream bronc, Snowfall.

"And nary a star showing," grumbled his Texan companion.

"Nope, nothing but yon earthy star of ours burning out on our old bed ground yonder," Court reminded them. "Steer clear of it. Give Staff Wylie a chance to connect. We don't want the Mounted man on our tails sifting along and swerving us to cut Staff's trail to Coyote Crossing."

Court pointed once more, although the intense velvet darkness of the prairie prevented any of his wrangler friends observing the slant of his arm in the mighty vagueness they breasted so recklessly and rapidly. They interpreted his direction from the tone of his voice.

"Only one Northwest Torch blazing on our bed ground, boys," Court impressed them afresh. "Keep that in your noodle. Welcome—Torch Number Two—is blacked out. Neighborliness—Torch Number One—is ebonied over. Trust—Torch Number Three—is the only one left. And by thunder, there's a torch to swear by. Trust. You keep it in the pigeon-holes

of your ornery souls—if you've got any souls."

"Oh, now, Court," they began to protest, "you don't figure we're that far beyond the pill—no, pail, is it? Or mebbe pale?"

"Jail," Court decided. "More literal, you ornery outlaws, defying Sam Steele and his shiftiest officers and men in a prisoner-snatching stunt that will sure set off a lot of repercussion caps—there I go, making bad language limp again. Or is it percussion I mean?"

"Percussion caps is right," the riders laughed. "Some hombre in our midst has a dog-eared dictionary in his bed roll which we peruse at night when Jack Marlow's homesick cattle ain't stampeding borderwards from off a range they still think is alien, back to their home grazing grass where they was raised. That's another falleasy—no, fallacy, by Webster—Court, the city public has. They listen to Western experts who didn't know nothing at all about ranches, dude or rude, and the experienced longhorn lifters tell them innocent town folks that when cattle stampede, they allus stampede toward the home range."

"Well, don't they?" chuckled Court, who knew very well what was in the cussedest steer's mind when he traveled anywhere.

"Sometimes they do," argued the Texan roper on Snowfall's flank, sticking there because it was the only landmark in all that wide space of Northwest night.

"Guff," scoffed his pal who rode ahead with Snowfall's long riata and the idea that it was keeping him from getting lost. "I've twisted their tails forty dif-

ferent ways from home. Course, if the home range is under their stumbling knees some place, they'll odd times fall on it."

"Well, we'll have to have a stampede to prove it, and when you move that herd, maybe the Crows and Gros Ventres will bring in proof a-plenty," Court settled their argument. "However, as I was intimating don't forget we're down to a single torch, and that's worse than a single match in a pinch. Trust, boys, in capital letters:—spell it, TRUST. It's what keeps everybody going: Jack, Alice, Muriel, Aunt Flo—the whole shooting match. It's in your hands, you hard-drinking, poker-playing, cow-cussing ornery T. N. T. hands. It's in your brand. It's up to you to light the other two torches again."

The Texan turned suddenly in his saddle behind Snowfall.

"Speaking of light," he broke out, "here's a ray of it now."

A beam out of the gloom behind dappled their ponies' rumps.

"Another train after the Overland?" inquired the rider next him. "Them newfangled headlights prick a long ways. Sometimes you can read that there Three Torches Town *Northwest Star* by the gleam of them at night."

Court was analyzing the dancing beam.

"Nope," he identified it, "but one of them prism-sided railway lanterns in a wire cage. Just what you'd expect from a smart Great Falls and Canada Railway clerk turned Mountie. The darned unbreakable lantern's jiggling on his saddle horn. It's Milt Slade.

you see, hitting the high spots out of town. Figured he could focus us—and he and Deerfoot have sure done it.”

“How come the Constable ain’t afeard to show his light and have it shot away?” propounded one of Court’s riders.

“Milt knew I didn’t let you gun it with him at Three Torches Station,” Court recalled his veto to them.

“Station ain’t here,” the Texan rebelled suddenly, with a string of cuss words.

His long black gun jumped from its holster and cracked at the glass of the lantern away behind.

The Texan missed the glass, and instantly Milt Slade’s pistol answered him as the Constable fired at the flash.

Slade’s bullet nicked the Texan’s shirt sleeve, high up on his gun arm, sang by and cut the riata of the led bronc Snowfall cleanly in two.

Jack Marlow’s creamy mount snorted and galloped free, disappearing in the night as Court Baker yelled at his bunch to hold their fire and keep their formation.

Court grabbed his unruly cowboy’s wrist as the aroused old-timer went to shoot again in the Mounted man’s direction.

“Quit it, Tex,” Court commanded. “Swing off the trail, down by the Old Man River, yonder. She’s rougher ground there, badger and gopher holes galore. I think we can slow him, maybe lose him, with luck.”

“Yeah!—lose him, Court,” his reckless riders jeered.



"Don't perforate him or Deerfoot—just lose him."

"Still, he's a-coming," Tex growled. "Riding gol-blasted stunty, like the circus."

"Means business," the puncher with the remains of Snowfall's leading rope in his hands deduced.

"Bound to get Jack Marlow who ain't here, and then he'll jug the hull outfit of us instead and toss us into Magistrate Holt's calaboose."

"Sartin sure," grumbled somebody else. "His light's sweeping the cayuses like sunup."

"Yessirree," declared another, "eternally coming. Looka the reflection over our heads in that black sky. Could race the Overland, that red-coated lad."

The Texan was figuring whether he could shift his artillery from the wrist Court Baker pinned, and shoot left-handed, backwards, over his own shoulder, just like Captain Carver and Company had performed throughout the near-West under the big top at shows he had seen. While he figured, the tattoo of the Constable's mustang music drummed louder all the time.

"Hear him pelt it, will you?" breathed Court, edging fast the river way. "Sees not so bad, does Milt—soap suds and all."

Then the approximate tattoo faltered in a stride, abruptly, significantly. They heard a mighty thump on the trail behind, the crash of breaking glass. The lantern went out and stayed out, although a little pool of its oil ignited on the prairie and flickered like a tiny witch gleam to mark the spot where Milt had been thrown.

"That's better than gunning him," sighed Court righteously. "Knew he couldn't miss all them gopher

holes here by the Old Man River—too danged many of them. Over yonder a piece is where I run up my big talley of gopher tails for Sir John A. Macdonald's Government bounty—or is there any bounty, you fellows know? Maybe it's only some more of Old Tomorrow's talk. However, one thing's certain in this wild night, boys. We got to go back."

"Why for we gotta?" snapped Tex.

"Can't leave Milt like that," decided Court. "Stunned? Neck dislocated? Skull fracture? Arms, legs, ribs cracked up? Lots of possibilities, Tex, when your pinto pancakes on you like Deerfoot."

"Yeah," sneered the Texan, "and Milt whispering in Deerfoot's ear to lie flat and still till we come first-aiding him. Then he'll pull the lot of us for Magistrate Holt's scrutiny over them frog-eyed, horn-rimmed glasses of his."

"You seem to remember Holt's glasses, Tex," snickered Court.

"Remember them?" exploded the Texan. "Didn't Holt fine me forty a month for three months—all my dang pay—for buying a few chips in the Toe Cork Hotel and playing a hand or two of poker? Anti-gambling law in the Northwest—ain't you heard the news? And then Holt sidles round on the seat of his bench-worn pants and fines me forty a month for nine months—still all my pay, marked in your time book, Court—for hefting a keg of liquor over the line to treat the guests at the last T. N. T. round-up barbecue?"

"Yep," Court bantered, "I recollect now. You ap-

pear right handy with mathematics, Tex."

"Mathematics!" Tex echoed. "Twelve months' pay gone into the hoosegow. So this year I work for nothing. That would send any man-size man back to Montana."

Court was turning his horse Soapy about in the pounded trail and waving the others to do the same.

"What's that got to do with Milt Slade lying yonder?" he demanded.

"Shamming," Tex scoffed. "Clink the complete party-if-you bite. Ain't our job, resuskitashun. Let Sam Steele's orderlies come and bring him in, or Sergeant Joyce."

Court gave Soapy the spurs.

"Ride it—back," he commanded them crisply, unmistakably. "Might even be pinned underneath, at that."

The T. N. T. riders swept down into a low wash-out by the Old Man River's bank, almost colliding with Slade's mustang standing upright again after the fall, apparently quite sound of limb, and nosing his prostrate master on the ground.

"Hit the gopher holes, all fair and square in the middle."

"Wonder Deerfoot didn't snap a leg."

"Upside down for Milt, and no shamming this trip, Tex."

The mingled comments of the cowboys as they jumped down around the Mounted man rose in a curious medley.

"Not dead, is he?" asked Court anxiously.

"Nope—not near dead."

"Breathing soft as a Peigan baby."

"Unconscious, yeah! But his head ain't got any skull fracture or anything. Bit of concussion, mebbe, but darn slight if any."

"Might have cracked a rib or two. Whar'll we take him, Court? Macleod Barracks?"

Court shook his head, wagging it grotesquely in the light of the matches the boys flared over the Constable.

"Don't use Barracks any," Court announced. "I keep legging it the opposite way. We'll take him across there to Three Torches Hospital where Alice Marlow is. Coincidence, you say? Not a condemned bit of it. Remember, Milt told her he'd see her over there. Well—he will."

The T. N. T. men got hold of the Constable round his limp, belted waist.

Court Baker cautioned them about their vigorous handling.

"Raise him slowly," Court directed. "That's better. Now ease him across Deerfoot's saddle, just so-so. Okay. Won't jolt his ribs so awful bad even if they are cracked. Ride slow. Couple of you hold him, either side. I'll lead Deerfoot along behind me into the town."

Making straight for the Three Torches Hospital lights, Court's party angled across the bend of the Old Man. Court rang the brand-new bell that glittered like a reflector on the door. Orderly Jim Pearce answered it, and head Night Nurse Martha Moore hurried downstairs as she got a glimpse of the size of Court's band, to stare over Jim's shoulder

and murmur her quick questions.

"Shooting, is it?" asked Jim rather dubiously.

"Nope," Court explained, "Constable got a fall in gopher town. Found him on the Old Man River trail down yonder. Put him to bed; will you, and notify Sam Steele? Milt ought to wake right pronto after jiggling in here."

"Maybe he will," hazarded Nurse Moore, her fingers on the Mounted man's wrist. "Pulse is good. You waiting to see?"

"Not a dasted minute," Court backed out. "We're overdue at the ghost of the T. N. T. Ranch, out of our way now, you savvy, Nurse Moore. We got to get home again to riding night herd."

"I hear the Marlow herd's moving south once more to Montana," ventured Orderly Pearce, as he rang for a stretcher and a couple of helpers to put the Constable into his cot.

"Any day or night," admitted Court. "The drive's definitely scheduled, although the special time isn't set. How's Mrs. Marlow doing, Nurse?"

"Mrs. Marlow is doing much better," Nurse Moore told him. "Away from so much excitement, you see."

"That's great," Court beamed. "The same to Milt, tell him, from me and the T. N. T. boys. So long."

In one brisk, short gallop, instead of the all-night lope they had expected, Court and his men rounded the lone fire blazing on the old home range.

The big Marlow herd was on the bed ground, the night guards circling in their places.

Only Staff Wylie was not there.

Court looked into the big horse corral as they put their ponies away.

The buckskin Biter was missing and Snowfall had not found his way home.

"You all may as well turn in," Court relieved the bunch. "Seem a little funny, won't it, without any bunkhouse?"

The T. N. T. hands, swinging their saddles with one-handed swings to the old top rail of the corral, whirled and squinted in the night.

Some more whitewashed cowcatchers along the new linked-up steel walled up the doorway of the bunkhouse.

Tex began to steam up, blasting everything that was ever remotely connected with Rupert Tucker's road.

"Sleep on it, Tex," Court advised. "You night-hawking outlaws still got your blankets and your fire."

The outfit stared meditatively at that solitary fire which symbolized TRUST to them now, with capital letters, for it had suddenly come to mean a mighty lot to all as they spread their bed rolls beside it.

"Ain't you snoozing too, Court?" they asked him soberly.

"Not yet," Court told them. "I'm sitting up to wait for Staff Wylie."

## CHAPTER XXI.

SERGEANT JOYCE from Fort Stand Off picked up the Three Torches Town *Northwest Star* from the hospital steps, where the two enterprising young newsboys of the place, Izzy and Sol Bloomgarter, had thrown it in their hurrying near-dawn delivery, and went inside just as head Day-Nurse Daisy Luther was coming on and head Night-Nurse Martha Moore was going off duty.

"Don't give it to him yet," the Sergeant instructed them with a grin. "Not till I've gone out of here. Break it gently to Constable Milt Slade, you understand."

"Who? What?" yawned Nurse Moore, somewhat fagged out with her night vigil and the care of the unexpected red-coated patient.

"Constable Slade, Martha," Daisy reminded her. "The news of Jack Marlow's escape. You certainly need some rest, don't you?"

Daisy Luther tapped the black headlines on the *Northwest Star*, but not all of the headlines, because Sergeant Joyce had his big hand purposely covering some of them.

"Oh! yes—he mumbled about that continually when he was coming to," Martha yawned.

Sergeant Joyce thrust it at them, hurriedly, as he went by.

"Give it to Orderly Jim Peace," he suggested diplomatically. "Jim can slip it to him casually, quietly."

"Aren't you going to ask how your injured Con-

stable is?" demanded Daisy Luther, with something like official resentment in her afterthought.

The Sergeant strode on.

"No, I'm going to see him."

"Don't you dare start to grill him," Martha Moore warned.

"No, this isn't Macleod Barracks," Daisy backed her sister nurse. "Nor Fort Stand Off, either."

Sergeant Joyce laughed at their immediate loyalty to their brand-new institution.

"It wouldn't do any good," he chuckled. "Milt has a hide on him—though you wouldn't guess it, girls. What he needs is a morning news item or two—from Jim Pearce, quietly, casually, remember."

Joyce's eyes twinkled mischievously and he waved a flirty finger at Daisy, as he pushed open the door of the Constable's room in the main-floor ward, a door which he had spotted as Milt's because the Mounted man's Stetson hat was hanging on the knob.

"Thought you could ride, Milt," the Sergeant greeted cheerily. "Drilled you myself, didn't I, round Fort Macleod in summer and in the open menage in winter, eh?"

The Constable saluted with a knowing smile on his unmarked face.

"I'm in uniform, you see, Sergeant. Got the tangle-footing pyjamas kicked off at sunup — well, false dawn we'll call it. But if you'll excuse me, I'll not rise to salute—just yet a-few minutes. They haven't brought my breakfast, and a man gets pretty empty. You know by now that I didn't eat any lunch at Three Torches Station last night."



Sergeant Joyce nodded thoughtfully.

"Just what did you get there, Milt?" he asked finally.

"Not a thing but soap suds."

"What kind of soap? Laundry, toilet, or pure, slippery soft soap?"

"Prairie Rose Soap, Sergeant."

"Oh! The soap that keeps a nymph like Muriel Marlow young and schoolgirly, eh?"

Milt reddened a little at the name.

The Sergeant began to back out the doorway.

"It's great to see you O. K., Milt," was his only added comment. "That's more than half the art of riding—knowing where and how to fall. So have your orange juice."

Milt called after him as Sergeant Joyce reached the hallway.

"Commandant Steele sent you, sir?"

"Yes—to see how you were," the Sergeant answered without sticking his head back in. "And Constable—"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"When you're washing up, if you find that missing cake of Prairie Rose soap, just bring it along to headquarters, will you? Almost any cake of soap that's grabbed in a hurry has some dirty fingerprints left on it."

With a temporary sinking feeling at his stomach that might have been prolonged hunger or a passing spasm of weakness, Milt felt for the first time that intense silence of his private hospital ward.

As he lost the sound of the Sergeant's footsteps dying away on the long rubber mat in the hallway,

he realized that it was very, very quiet there in the cot, a vacuum that made it all the easier to digest Sergeant Joyce's last words.

The Fort Stand Off sergeant's words were quite simple, but they contained a significant command, and the Constable was fully aware that the order, crisp and clear and to the point, came direct from Commandant Steele.

Then fresh sounds drifted to him from the corridor, faint tinkling of dishes on a tray that meant breakfast, the almost inaudible scuff of Nurse Daisy Luther's rubber heels, the slightly heavier rub or Orderly Jim Pearce's sneakers.

The Nurse and Jim conversed in a soft tone that barely carried to Milt.

"Honestly, how do you think he is this morning, Nurse?" Jim was asking.

"Much better, of course. He recovered consciousness soon after they got him here and fell asleep right away when he swallowed the tablet I gave him while Doctor Kilgour taped his two cracked ribs. An iron man, Orderly—just what we romantic nurses expect the Mounted to be. Though, frankly, a weaker rider might have been crushed to death under that pony."

Jim Pearce was rustling the morning newspaper uncertainly in his capable hands.

"Then you think he's able to stand the shock of reading the *Northwest Star*, bold and black and wet from Editor Mat Speedwell's sensational press?"

The Constable himself answered Jim, for they were through the doorway and into the room.

"Ho-hum!" Milt yawned, taking the breakfast tray

from the nurse with one hand and grabbing the *Northwest Star*, which Pearce was shaking portentously in his face, with the other hand. "Course I'm able. Nothing but a shaking up I got. Is there anything startling in Mat Speedwell's old rag?"

Jim nodded, shuffling his sneakers as if to get a grip on the floor against any sudden and unexpected outburst.

"Veiled reference or two to you, Constable," Jim explained. "Thought you might be stirred up over it. All about Jack Marlow's escape—and his hold-up of the Overland Express."

## CHAPTER XXII.

THE Constable had followed already the Sergeant's parting suggestion and had swallowed his orange juice, but he gulped suddenly on the last of the bowl of cereal he downed.

"His *what?*" he roared at Jim Pearce, as he lifted his coffee cup in one hand while he forked the bacon and eggs into his hungry mouth with the other.

"Holding up the Overland," Jim elucidated, pointing at the paper Milt had laid on the tray where he could sight it without stopping the necessary process of stoking up to bolster his patently waning strength.

"My goodness!" cried Nurse Luther. "Don't excite him that way, Jimmy. It's a flattener for me, too. Why, I never heard a—"

"I'm not excited," Milt declared. "Here, spread that paper a bit more till I see, will you? That's better."

"It's all in the headlines, mostly," Jim indicated, underlining them with his finger.

The orderly started to read as he fingered the big typed letters.

"Prisoner Jack Marlow Escapes The Mounted— Holds Up Same Train—While They Search For Him —Loots Mail And Express Coach Of One Hundred Thousand Dollars—Rides Away On A Buckskin Pony."

"Where in heck did Jack get the buckskin?" yelled the Constable. "His cream bronc Snowfall was in Court Baker's T. N. T. bunch of riders I was heel-

ing when I flopped."

"Hush—please," begged the nurse. "Not so loud. Mrs. Marlow, you know—she's in the room next to yours. Good gracious, what's going to happen now? Where was that hold-up?"

The Constable had started reading along with the orderly.

"At Coyote Crossing," he told Daisy Luther. "It says how Conductor Charlie Baird stopped the train there to search it for Jack—on my wire to do so, you may guess—"

"Yes, yes, go on," Daisy urged. "I'm the one who's getting excited."

Milt went on.

"And while the Overland Express is stopped for nearly an hour—searching it good and plenty from pilot to observation platform, from end to end and back again, you may guess once more—"

"Yes, I know," Daisy cut in. "Go ahead."

"Who steps into the express messenger's car while they're searching — looking under the brake beams and likely moving the top coal of the tender, I expect — but Jack Marlow himself?" Milt translated. "Held up the messenger and got away with the Edmonton-Calgary-Macleod Branch payroll. Cash. One hundred thousand dollars."

Jim Pearce slapped the headlines emphatically.

"Pretty nervy robbery, eh?" he asked admiringly of the other two.

"Robbery!" barked Milt. "It's more of an outrage, a slap in the face for me. Jack's an outlaw now, if you call him by his right name. See that dollar sign and the suggestive string of round O's Editor

Mat Speedwell has looped across the columns? A reward on Jack's head. Amount isn't fixed yet, but it'll be big enough, you bet, when Rupert Tucker sets it—seeing that his contractors must shoulder the loss.”

“Big enough, sure,” agreed Jim.

“And Editor Mat hints that, if the Mounted wants to be as swift as Marlow, I should lose no time in getting out of bed and pulling down that reward. All right, I'm not losing it.”

The Constable's feet thudded solidly on the floor beside his cot.

“My aunt!” gasped Daisy Luther. “Jimmy, don't let him leap out that way. Constable, I'm not at all certain you should be up yet. Doctor Kilgour should see you before your discharge.”

She slumped back into her official status all at once.

“Never mind Doctor Kilgour,” Milt advised her brusquely. “I'm all right. Where's my Stetson? Oh yes, on the door knob yonder. But the darned knob's turning—and my hat with it. Hello, how do you do, Mrs. Marlow.”

“How are you, Constable Slade,” nodded Alice Marlow, far more coolly, composedly than he had last seen her when leaving the Marlow Ranch, although she twirled the Stetson hat nervously on her finger in the act of returning it to him. “Better, I see. Nurse Moore told me about your—accident. My room's next to yours, you understand. And, well — I overheard the rest.”

Milt stared at her momentarily, in some confusion, glimpsing her more like a rare orchid than ever in her mauve dressing gown, marvelling more than ever

at her frail beauty and seeing more and more resemblance between her loveliness and Muriel's, although Muriel's had the added essence of girlish strength.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Marlow," he apologized lamely. "They should have dumped me into Macleod Barracks instead."

She smiled, her violet eyes like the cups of the wild flowers brimming with purple light.

"Then I shouldn't have had this opportunity of seeing you, Constable," Alice declared.

Her white hands, so fragile as to be almost transparent, waved back Daisy Luther whose nursely anxiety had switched from one patient to the other, both supposed to be under her watchful care.

"But I'm not certain you should be seeing anyone yourself, yet, Mrs. Marlow," Daisy began to worry over her. "You were getting along so well, steadying right down, and now—"

"I'm fine, Nurse," she assured Daisy. "And it's only for a minute. The Constable's going, and I just wanted to tell him that it was patently impossible for Jack to hold up that Overland train at Coyote Crossing."

"Somebody did," pointed out Jim Pearce, still hovering over the headlines which seemed to possess a great fascination for him.

"Evidently, yes—but Mrs. Marlow's belief is, of course, that they've got the wrong bandit identification," the nurse told him.

Alice thanked Daisy Luther for her support with a grateful flash of her wonderful eyes.

"Absolutely," Alice insisted. "The very idea is ridiculous. If Jack was on the train, he couldn't. No

guns, no horse. And otherwise, it's just as silly. How could he arrive at Coyote Crossing in time? How could he go back to Three Northwest Torches Ranch, rope the buckskin to ride, and then connect anywhere with the Express?"

"The Express was stopped for over an hour," the Constable spoke softly, as if he were reminding himself rather than Mrs. Marlow of that fact.

She was smiling serenely, apparently believing in her own deductions instead of loyally giving her husband any benefit of doubt.

"I heard you say that his horse Snowfall was in the bunch you chased?"

"Yes, Snowfall was. I couldn't tell whether Jack was on it or whether it was led. More than that, guns and extra mounts could have been provided for—for anyone at Coyote Crossing. Please remember, Mrs. Marlow, that I'm not insinuating or anything. I'm merely stating what's possible."

Alice nodded thoughtfully, without any trace of resentment.

"T. N. T. riders, you mean?" she questioned quite frankly.

"Maybe," the Constable admitted.

"Were they all there?" was her next swift and significant question.

Milt grinned his admission that they had staged representation in a solid body as he recalled his quick check-over of those present the moment he stepped upon Three Torches Station platform with his prisoner.

"They were all at the station," he told her without any hesitation.



"That includes Staff Wylie, top rider, and Court Baker, foreman?"

"Oh! yes, sure. I saw both Staff and Court there, that is, at the depot. Although of course it's hard to keep track of everybody in a quick shift. You must make allowance for that. After I went inside for coffee and sandwiches, I couldn't say who was anywhere. Chasing the T. N. T. bunch of cowboys was a lot of guesswork, too, for I'm unable to swear that they were all in the crowd I sprinted after down to the Old Man River."

Mrs. Marlow appeared to be keeping the leaders of the T. N. T. hands in mind for her next thought concerned them still.

"Was Court Baker in that Old Man River pursuit of yours?" she demanded.

"I couldn't take my oath," Milt asserted with all honesty. "However, I am told he was."

"Was Staff Wylie riding with them, then?"

"Couldn't swear as to that, either," the Mounted man dodged the question. "Also nobody told me that he was riding rout." So you must figure on the chance that someone could provide the buckskin for a getaway from a Coyote Crossing hold-up. If not T. N. T. hands, we'll say, for instance, then T. N. T. friends, Mrs. Marlow. Those for whom your three ranch fires always burned—and, we might even imagine, talked—three beacons of welcome, neighborliness, trust. Yes, perhaps three voices of the same character—flame tongues speaking to such friends."

Alice Marlow glanced rapidly out of the hospital window of Milt Slade's room which faced the Marlow homestead across the once open range.

There in the dawnlight she saw the smoke of only one torch spiraling skyward, and she swiftly understood the language and the omen.

She wondered if the Constable understood it, too, and interpreted the message as well.

"Could you name those friends of Jack's and mine?" she asked evenly.

"I could name some who showed they were heart and soul and fist with you people when Rupert Tucker had me oversee the link-up of the steel at Three Northwest Torches Ranch."

Alice inclined her head in a gesture of gay challenge.

"Go ahead and catalog them, then," she invited with daring.

"Well, there was Al Macdonald, of the Glengarry Ranch, out of the Porcupines."

"Yes—any more?"

"Chad Sharples of the Winder Ranch."

"O.K.," Alice smiled. "Keep going that way—and fast."

"Joe Macfarland of the Pioneer," the Constable recited.

Mrs. Marlow extended her slim, shapely arm in a window sweep, eastwards, from the T. N. T. lone camp smoke.

"Of course," she nodded briskly. "Joe's just across the way."

"Then there's Bright of Bright's Ranch," he indicated, following her motion.

"Exactly," Alice admitted the long-standing friendship.

Milt waved an arm down Old Man River way,

where he had nosed the dirt with Court Baker's tribe of gophers.

"Also La Grandeur from the La Grandeur Ranch below us, yonder," he recalled.

Milt paused, as if there were no special need to tax his memory further.

"All white men," she succinctly summed up for him. "Any others who deal in buckskin ponies, or pintos or piebalds, for that?"

The Mounted man instantly took up her cue, completing the rehearsal of Jack's list of time-tried backers in the Macleod District.

"Red ones, too," he went on. "Chief North Axe and his Peigan young men, Burnt Hill, Whistling Bird, Flying Cloud and all the rest. Chief Red Crow and his Blood young men, Dark Sun, Storm Feather, Quick Foot, and all that string of lively hunters who never seem to realize where their reserve ends and the wide open spaces commence to lure. When it comes down to food and fire and blanket and wild horsehides for bareback flight, Mrs. Marlow, red friends are as good as white."

She agreed gravely, thinking perhaps he knew too much for such a youthful outlook as his own and for the romantic enthusiasm he might be expected to bring to his duties of the Mounted.

"Yes, they are, indeed," she declared. "Sometimes even better."

"So I may as well tack on an addenda, or a postscript or something," Milt decided, "and include the Resident Indian Agents on the Reserves."

Alice lifted her eyebrows at that.

Milt saw in her widened eyes the image of Muriel,

like a lovely reflection in a purple iris-bordered pool.

"Yes," he nodded, "Harry Nash for the Peigans, Jim Wilson for the Bloods. I know that, although they're strict enough in their authority over the reservists, and, incidentally, always ready to lend a hand to the Mounted Police, Harry and Jim are, first and foremost, friends of Jack's. Accordingly it follows that the buckskin in question could have been staked out, after all, or hobbled handy, or merely provided, if anyone wants to phrase it in that ambiguous way. Why, even an unsuspected man like Rupert Tucker, say—a man, say, who wouldn't be expected to turn at all friendly to Jack—might have made shift to furnish hoofed transportation, from Coyote Crossing."

"Rupert Tucker!" echoed Alice sharply, and revolved her head with the echo at a low knocking outside the doorway she had just come through. "Why, I shouldn't for a moment imagine that—"

Jim Pearce, in discreet interruption, had slipped to the door and partly opened it.

Jim was forbidding something and somebody in a protesting voice; not much louder than a big whisper, his arms on the jams, controlling the entrance to the Constable's room.

"I'm not sure about visitors, sir," the orderly kept saying. "I'm not allowed, you know. The head nurse has the say. Miss Luther will maybe tell you. The name you gave? Oh! Rupert Tucker. Yes, yes, I understand. The Turkey Trail solicitor—beg pardon, I mean the Edmonton-Calgary-Macleod Branch solicitor. But still, you'd better wait till I see if Miss Luther will permit a visi—"

The crisp voice of Rupert Tucker broke in earn-

estly, authoritatively on Jim's protests.

"It's no ordinary hospital call, orderly," Tucker reminded him. "I just have to see Constable Milt Slade at once. That's what I'm going to do this minute."

Rupert ducked under Pearce's arms, shoving the door open and pushing past him.

"Nurse Luther," warned the orderly, a little angrily, "I told him to wait, but here he comes right into the room."

Tucker blundered blindly ahead, making straight for the red uniform.

Alice Marlow's marvelous eyes hardened a trifle as they rested on him.

"Speak of the little imp," she whispered to Milt, "speak of the—let's put it plainly—the little devil and—"

Milt grinned his appreciation for her flash of spirit, admiring her fighting heart that could rise suddenly above physical weakness in such an emergency as this, turn abruptly from a hospital cot—even to the point of deserting it if necessary, he imagined—and range herself with the rest of the T. N. T. ranks in the adamant opposition to Tucker.

"I know the balance of that suitable quotation," he murmured in a humorous tremolo. "One of my old nursery rhymes."

They seemed to laugh together, and in that swift moment of jest Milt felt himself closer to her woman's heart than at any time before.

More than that, he had the strange, thrilling sensation that in his unconscious approach to the mother's heart he was closer than ever to Muriel's.

"This won't do," he went on in his semi-jokester's murmuring while Rupert Tucker continued his impetuous advance, "won't do at all—"

"What won't do?" asked Alice Marlow, looking at him curiously.

"Won't do by any manner of means," he whispered judiciously, as if he were speaking directly to the absent Muriel. "I'm supposed to be neutral, you know, Mounted arbitrator, and here I'm about half ready to line up with the opposition, too. Good Heavens! What would Sergeant Joyce say to that? What would Commandant Sam Steele himself say? Young woman—"

Milt paused a moment, still apparently addressing the absent Muriel.

"Young girl, I mean," he growled softly, "keep out of it and let me see straight. There are a lot of funny angles in this business ever since my Great Falls and Canada Railroad stick-up, and I have to turn those corners. So keep out's the word. At least, keep out for a while."

Milt shook himself, as if out of a wild dream that he would have preferred to go on dreaming, and faced Tucker quite officially.

"How are you this morning, Mr. Tucker?" he excused his unannounced intrusion. "Got a *Northwest Star* in your hand, too, I happen to notice."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

TUCKER rumbled the paper in a businesslike way in his fingers, continually glancing at the headlines while he strode forward in a sort of fascination that seemed stronger even than Jim Pearce's. He was so erratically and so momentarily immersed that he did not notice Mrs. Marlow just at first, standing there with Nurse Daisy Luther. Apparently Rupert accepted her, off-hand, and without any especial inspection from his short-sighted eyes which functioned better outdoors than in, as an assistant nurse.

"Yes, I have, Constable," he began, "and seeing you cramming your Stetson onto your head, I don't need to suggest, maybe—"

"Oh! No, you don't need to suggest anything, Tucker," Milt cut him off. "My fault, of course, and no repetition, please. I'm going to repair that fault. I'll get Jack Marlow yet, and the reward, too."

"That's what I wanted to see you about," Rupert explained. "I posted it at the direction of the Express Company, to the amount of ten thousand dollars."

Jim Pearce whistled, then shut up suddenly, apologizing to Mrs. Marlow in regretful pantomime behind Tucker's back.

Tucker, however, felt the wind of his gesture and turned about inquiringly as he continued.

"And I'm afraid that in posting it," Rupert enlarged, "I've put myself in wrong again with Muriel, Aunt Flo and Mrs. Mar—"

The solicitor stopped, for in his turnabout he real-

ized that it was Alice herself with Nurse Daisy Luther.

"And me," Alice completed his words.

"Oh! Beg pardon, Mrs. Marlow. I—mistook you. Not expecting to meet you just here, you see. But I'm awfully glad to find you up. Congratulations on your improvement. Congrat—"

"How do you imagine you've put yourself in wrong?" Alice broke in on him.

"Maybe you three ladies will think the railroad is really persecuting you. You'll think, perhaps, that I'm personally persecuting you and—"

"Have we any new reasons to think that?"

Rupert Tucker hesitated.

"Well, Muriel, you know," he confessed; "the station management dismissed Muriel this morning after that lunchroom escape."

"They suspect my daughter?" cried Alice, her blue eyes lighting up dangerously—more like the blaze of thunderbolt lightning than the hue of peaceful, sylvan violets.

"Certainly they can't prove anything," Rupert jumped to concede, "but it—it looked rather fishy, you'll admit."

Constable Slade snapped his fingers.

"Hades!" Milt sneered. "And what about that clumsy waiter? My fingers are blistered to burn still, with that fool's stumbling."

"They couldn't find out which waiter it was," Tucker replied. "Every one of them denied it, and had a perfect alibi. Draining coffee, serving soup, cutting ham, frying eggs. So the matter was dropped by the station management—except for Muriel."



Milt shot a sympathetic glance at Muriel's mother, her cheeks now burning as brightly as her eyes, with the first color he had seen there.

"Lost her position over it all," he murmured in comment, half to Alice, half to Tucker. "That's too thundering bad."

Tucker, too, gazed uncertainly at Mrs. Marlow, feeling himself hardly in a spot to dare offer his own sympathy.

"Overly strict about regulations, yes, I think," Rupert agreed. "The Marlow finances—I mean, the Marlow herd—being temporarily tied up, makes it not so good. Wages still going on and that Court Baker's gang hanging round idle. Especially Court himself just now, pottering half his time about your new cottage down there on River Street, Mrs. Marlow—if you'll excuse me mentioning it. The new cottage, by the way, that you haven't been in yet."

Tucker took off his gold rimmed spectacles and polished them nervously while he mentioned the new cottage. The Constable noted that he was flustered, almost in a sudden agony of uncertainty, quite out of court as it were, divested of his habitual cool prosecutor's poise. To Milt, Rupert looked as if he might be the accused himself this time.

"I—I want you to go down with me to that new Marlow cottage, Constable Slade, on your way out," Tucker managed to blurt all at one breath, evidently spewing a statement that was bound to be unpleasant. "Another matter I wished to see you about, subsidiary. I'll not detain you long, but it's best to have you with me when I go down there on River Street."

"Why?" asked Milt sharply. "Afraid of Court Baker, are you?"

"No—in a sense, no. Only I hate to heap trouble on anybody with trouble enough already."

"Already is right," Milt nodded. "Lost ranch, lost job, lost health, lost freedom. Now this hold-up mystery. It's plenty, sure enough. Don't tell me there's anything else. I seem to read an extra in your panicky face, Tucker."

"There's another legal point, Constable."

"And what is it?" Milt demanded still more sharply, and with a trace of suspicion.

"That cottage Aunt Flo and Muriel are in, and Mrs. Marlow hasn't been in, by the way—"

"Yes, go ahead," urged the Mounted man.

"They bought it, of course, and there's the question of title. That land along River Street is railroad land. They have only squatters' rights."

Milt's severe face stiffened considerably.

"Then you just bet I'd better be with you down there when you tell them that," he declared. "Especially if Court happens to be present."

Tucker evidently lost a little more of his enthusiasm for the notification of the female squatters on the switch strip his company had reserved in Three Torches Town.

"Well, of course," he vacillated, "of course—"

"You going to back out, Tucker?" the Constable cornered him.

"No, no, I can't back out. The railway's order has come to me to move all squatters. They have to use that switch at once, now that the link-up is com-

pleted. But maybe you're not feeling fit just yet, Constable?"

Milt laughed derisively.

"You say that hopefully, Tucker," he observed. "I'm feeling fine, I told you. I want to go down by their house anyhow, because—"

Milt dropped his tone, with a side look at Mrs. Marlow who was engaged in an impetuous interchange of words with the nurse.

"Because it's a shining wonder that Jack Marlow doesn't chance it in with some of that cash for three ladies who need it," he confided to Tucker. "Great Heavens, when you stop and think of it—due to move again! No rights but squatters' rights."

"It isn't my fault," Tucker washed his hands. "Court Baker talks of a frame-up. The Jack Marlow family gets riled, quite naturally, I suppose, and slings insinuations. But you can see for yourself, Milt, that River Street can't be blamed on me. That was the real estate agent's fault, Lester Carr's fault. Les is a sharper, sure enough."

"Yes, I know Les is a boom agent," agreed the Mounted man. "He's made the most of Three Torches Town boom overnight."

"All right, then," sighed Tucker, "we'll go down and make it brief. My horse is outside. Where is yours, Constable?"

"Come to think of it, that's the way a busy man forgets his best friend," Milt chided himself. "Must have been cracked harder on the coco than I thought. What happened to Deerfoot, Jim? Is he dead? Break his neck?"

"No, Deerfoot's lively enough and eating Western

oats," Jim Pearce informed him. "I had Toad Foster stable him at the Toe Cork Livery when I put you to bed. I'll call Toad to bring him over."

"And another saddle horse for me!"

It was the determined voice of Alice Marlow directing Jim.

Tucker and Milt turned round in surprise.

Now Milt interpreted her warm conversation on the side with Nurse Daisy Luther.

"No, goodbye, Nurse. I'm not staying. My mind is quite made up. You'll arrange my discharge with Matron Esther Maddox."

"And my own discharge, Nurse, while you're at it," the Constable put in. "But, Mrs. Marlow, you've made up your mind, I can see. The point is, have you made up your heart—sufficiently, that is? You're riding—?"

"Riding the M and M, the Montana-Marlow way," she assured him with all finality. "Riding like the rest. There'll be no second move, no third house for me this side the border."

Milt saw at a glance that there was no changing her mind or her heart.

All he could do was to hope that these would hold good for the border crossing through the Sweet Grass Hills and into the Bear's Paw Mountain country that flanked the old Montana-Marlow, country which the Gros Ventres and the Crows inevitably would dispute. There, Milt knew, the south-of-the-border Indians might scent a cattle raid the moment the Marlow herd crossed the line. They waited for a welcome chance to even old scores with Jack Marlow's riders who had fought them off both the American Mon-

tana-Marlow and the Canadian Three Northwest Torches. If Chief North Axe's Peigans and Chief Red Crow's Bloods helped the T. N. T. hands south, a big tribal battle seemed imminent.

It was some comfort to Milt to remember that he himself would be there if trouble broke, since the duty of passing the whole herd through the Customs post at St. Mary's River devolved on him as part of his patrol out of Fort Stand Off.

But first he had to catch Mrs. Marlow's husband, and without another word of protest he followed Alice out and along the corridor past Matron Esther Maddox's office where Nurse Daisy Luther had gone on ahead to smooth things.

Daisy, fidgeting with the edges of the white cap to settle it faultlessly on the waves of her black hair before her superior, her expression in her large brown eyes more disturbed than usual, was explaining patiently over and over again while the Matron's prim lips straightened and pursed alternately in doubtful objection and her sharp, up-tilted nose climbed a little higher under gold-fitted glasses angled like a haughty pince-nez.

Esther Maddox raised heavy eyebrows over jade eyes marked underneath with the penalty of her profession, the long night watches. She puffed her fleshy cheeks and shook a huge headful of brown curls in a sort of routine gesture she had when called on for sudden decisions.

"So—so unorthodox," the Matron defined. "One patient wouldn't sound so awfully bad. But two unsigned discharges—hm-m-m!"

However, at the new fire in Alice Marlow's eye, at

the fresh blood in her cheek, she nodded her head.

"Oh, yes, it's quite permissible, I suppose, after all," she gave in. "I'll fix it with Doctor Kilgour. It will be perfectly proper, Mrs. Marlow. Goodbye."

With a stroke of her pen, gold-fitted to match her eyeglasses, Esther Maddox fixed it.

"Goodbye, Matron," grinned the Constable. "Sudden routine summons for me, you better make it. Goodbye, Nurse. Stay with you longer next time I come. If I can't make it, maybe you'll come to me."

"Maybe we shall," smiled the Matron.

"Especially if you have to cross the border," brooded Daisy Luther. "Any man might need a nurse in those Bear's Paw Mountains. Goodbye."

Outside, Toad Foster was waiting with Deerfoot and a rangy, light-saddled chestnut. The chestnut's saddle horn floated a small-sized pair of ladies' chaps thoughtfully handed Toad by his confidante, Annette Royale, as he went by and told her that Mrs. Marlow must be leaving.

"Thanks, Toad," accepted Alice, tucking her skirts into them. "Annette is a treasure. I guess you know that, eh?"

"Annette thinks of everything, sure," blushed the Toe Cork Livery Stable boy.

The chestnut turned a spirited but confiding eye on his woman rider as the Constable gave her a hand to mount.

Deerfoot whinnied joyfully at his master and pawed dirt onto him.

"You old gopher excavator," criticized Milt. "You better dig them out in daylight after this and not try to murder me."

He winked at Toad Foster.

"Not hurt at all, Toad?"

"Only a wee cut on his fetlock. I smudged it with tar. Ride fifty mile again, Deerfoot can."

"Perhaps he'll need to," pondered Milt, swinging up. "So long, Toad."

Tucker, who had followed them out in silence, got into the saddle of his slatey range pony without speaking much and tailed them moodily. Down Main Street they cantered to turn into River Street along the Old Man River's bank. At the curve of River, and facing on Main, they passed the *Northwest Star* office and the office of Lester Carr, realtor, adjoining.

Editor Mat Speedwell, bald, with no hat but a green eyeshade, yellow-eyed, thin-nosed, ragged-mustache, long-cigar slanting between his browned teeth, leaned coatless in his own doorway talking to the real estate agent on the next step.

Alice Marlow checked her chestnut momentarily in front of them.

"Correct your next edition, Editor Speedwell," she spoke significantly. "That hold-up business wasn't Jack's. I'm on my way to find him and clear him of such utter newspaper nonsense."

Speedwell's eyeshade came off in his hand in place of his hat.

"I hope so, Mrs. Marlow," he half apologized. "I'm powerful sorry myself, you know, but I have to give the news."

"In those gigantic headlines? Promise me one thing before I lose my temper and promise you something a woman doesn't ordinarily deal in."

"What?" guessed Mat. "Suit? Or Court Baker's

cowhands and a wrecked office?"

"I'm not showing my hand. Promise me, when Jack's cleared, you'll make the headlines just as huge?"

"I certainly will, Mrs. Marlow, and red inked," promised Mat Speedwell heartily. "I hope you can. Haven't a thing against Jack here in this office. Only, I got to give the news and get readers. My *Northwest Star's* only been started, you must remember. I got to carry the news. Isn't that right, Les?"

Lester Carr, bulky in his brown tweeds, brown-derby set aslant the Western winds that always tried to lift it, tipped the derby and the slim black cigar that matched Speedwell's.

Appealed to so often as a one-man jury, Les could hardly be blamed for compressing into his personality the importance of twelve men. He breathed prosperity from his heavy, grunting chest when he talked. Affluence flowed from his fat, gesturing fingers. He adopted ponderous jewelry that outweighed Tucker's gold plate, sporting a diamond to boot and dangling a chronometer that set the new town clock in its stride, foretold Chinooks and wintry weather and did almost everything but steer a ship.

"That's right, Mat," Les pronounced, "and I can guess without stopping to think that Mrs. Marlow's eye doesn't turn any kinder on me than on you. I see in her face that she thinks I queered the Marlow family on that cottage deal."

"Well, didn't you?" challenged Alice. "Mr. Tucker says you did."

Les switched expansive gray eyes on Tucker,



rubbed his red nose and blew balloon cheeks angrily at the solicitor.

"Don't let Turkey Trail Tucker fool you, Mrs. Marlow," he exploded. "I know people call real estate sellers sharpers, me included. You got to be sharp to deal land and houses. And I'm that sharp that I bought up River Street before I subdivided."

"You bought it with your eyes open," Rupert Tucker pointed out, heatedly.

"So I did," nodded Carr, "and I'm hanging on. If you lose, Mrs. Marlow, I lose too. But I know thundering well that the pair of us will get title when the records are cleared. There's been some tall juggling with the books—"

"You mean to say, Carr, to insinuate," flared Tucker. "You accuse—"

"If you didn't shift odd and even numbers, Tucker," Les checked him abruptly, "don't take it so violent. Somebody did. I'm no gambler. I'm a realtor—sharpener. But I'll stake you and Staff Wylie, who have twin experience in bets, about one thousand bucks that Jack Marlow's homestead isn't odd-numbered either."

Alice's eyes fairly shone but, because Tucker seemed about to ride Les down in sudden resentment and Les jumped forward to pull him from his horse, she urged her chestnut on for the cottage, letting the Constable swing Deerfoot into her place between the two men.

"Better leave it, Les," advised the Mounted officer wisely.

"If you say so, Milt," grinned Les.

Milt winked at Speedwell.

"And skip the upper case for a day or two, Mat. Use the lower more."

"Sure, Milt, sure," Editor Mat cooperated, smiling shrewdly. "In a pinch I can always italicize."

Slade looked ahead, down River Street.

Alice Marlow had almost reached the cottage.

"Come on, Tucker, we've an appointment," he reminded Rupert. "Don't keep the ladies waiting."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

DEERFOOT and the slatey range pony sprinted to catch her, but where the Sweet Grass Trail angled into River Street along the Old Man's waters another rider bound up from the border turned in some few jumps ahead of them, partially blocking the way so that they had to slow momentarily.

The rider, lean and sunburned, in pearl sombrero, blue shirt, brown corduroy trousers tucked into high elk riding boots, with a United States sheriff's star pinned to his shirt pocket, reined off a shade to let them by. He slanted a glance back over his open-collared, muscled shoulder that swung in the easy time of the distance rider to his even hip lurch which barely cleared his Montana stockman's light saddle. His horse, slim and stringy, sulphur colored so that, speeding, it might have been taken at far sight for a cloud on the plains, glanced also in a neck-curve past, its tow-like mane and tail both streaming sidewise in the stiff morning wind off the Sweet Grass Hills—glanced and nickered to Deerfoot and the slate.

The Constable saw a luxuriant forelock of lady-fair hair sun-bleached silvery—as if gone prematurely gray—a pair of youthful brassy eyes denying that, a hatchet nose side-ridged deeply as ravines into the hollows of his gaunt, scarlet cheeks, teeth so immaculate in their rugged lip setting over a rugged chin that they outflashed any artificial plates Milt had ever admired.

"So you got my wire, Fred?" Milt saluted.

"Fred, you say?" barked Tucker sharply, looking

up swiftly first at Milt and then at the border rider.  
"Who's that?"

"Fred Provost, Sheriff of Sweet Grass, U. S. A." Milt told him. "Don't you recognize him?"

Then Tucker's short-sighted eyes caught the silver star's glint.

"It's several years, isn't it, since I saw him?" he put up the excuse.

"Has Fred changed any?" demanded the Mounted man pointedly.

"Not a mite," decided Tucker. "Wire, you said? I thought your wire was to Coyote Crossing, to Conductor Charlie Baird to stop the Overland."

"I sent two wires, one through train caller Danny Moss, one direct through the operator."

"The operator never mentioned two to me," grumbled Rupert Tucker.

"I warned him not to. If Jack Marlow wasn't on the Overland, he couldn't get to any other line handy but the Great Falls and Canada. Fred was the man to look into that."

The Constable drew rein as he spoke.

"Rupert Tucker, Fred," he nodded. "Says he'd know you anywhere. Says you haven't altered, only, like myself, nearly ten years older."

Fred Provost stared at Tucker, but without passing a word of comment about renewed acquaintance or second meeting, answered Milt. He smiled as he answered, a smile that pooled like glowing sunlight in his bronze eye sockets and mellowing moonlight in his cheek recesses.

"So you let Jack Marlow away again, Milt?" he chuckled, giving at one and the same time his official

jibe, his comradely jest.

"Again?" echoed Milt. "You still think, after all these years, that Jack managed the first hold-up—the Great Falls and Canada?"

"His name's still on my warrant," stated the Sweet Grass Sheriff genially. "Only your Mounted Police never let him cross the border into my custody."

"No," speculated the Constable, "I understand that well enough—they never did."

"And your Mounted never picked him up on the Canadian side during all those aforementioned years," Provost grinned in friendly criticism.

"No, they never did that, either," Milt admitted. "They were then, and are still, without evidence enough for any arrest for hold-up."

"Couldn't Sam Steele or Sergeant Joyce or somebody trump up something, Milt?"

"Not a thing, Fred. Torch telegraph on the T. N. T. Ranch is quicker than the key."

"Couldn't the smart N.W.M.P. frame him some measly way?" teased Provost.

"The Northwest Mounted just doesn't do that sort of thing," Milt reminded him.

"And you mean you're bound to resnatch Jack just because he escaped you and not because there happened to be a Great Falls and Canada hold-up years ago and an Overland Express hold-up last night?" jeered the Sheriff jocularly.

"Yes, the Overland charge must come later," Milt explained.

Sheriff Fred Provost laughed grimly.

"You're not a Mounted Policeman, Milt," he defined. "You're a philanthropist. You coolly and

calmly pass by personal fortunes, bandit rewards and such. First thing you know, I'll sneak Jack Marlow and, you ten-thousand-dollar windfall I notice posted at the Three Torches Town limits, right from under your proud nose, my scarlet-coated friend."

The Constable gazed for a few seconds at the Sheriff.

"Printed notice, Fred?" he asked at last.

"Sure," smiled Provost, "I couldn't miss it. Big type, red-edged, all speckled with sheriff-like stars."

The Mounted man stared inquiringly at Rupert Tucker who had not said a thing but who had listened keenly to every word. In Tucker's attitude Milt scented a diffidence similar to that which the solicitor had shown back in the hospital when confronted by Alice Marlow, the uncertain, nervous, aloof poise of a prosecutor suddenly become the accused and hardly knowing of what he was accused.

For Tucker had the feeling all along that, although the Constable and the Sheriff talked seemingly in generalities, their crisp conversational interchanges while they passed each other on the trail somehow specifically concerned and affected him.

"Who printed the notices, Tucker?" Milt asked curiously, as if just in afterthought.

"Mat Speedwell," Rupert informed him.

"So early?" mused Milt. "*Northwest Star* and posters, too? Before I was out of bed?"

"Mat goes to press at midnight."

Milt nodded, like a man recollecting, at the Sheriff from Sweet Grass.

"So Mat does," he agreed. "I remember now. You didn't see anything on the Sweet Grass Trail to win

that reward, Provost?"

"Not a sign of Jack Marlow," the Sheriff lamented. "Jack never rode the Sweet Grass Trail over the border last night, or I'd have found him, or discovered his tracks. But I'm still hunting. Soon's I eat in town here, I'm going up to Macleod Barracks to present my credentials to Sam Steele. I'm not like you, Milt—passing by good money when it barks like a dog at me."

"All right," laughed the Constable. "See you there, then. I'm looking in at the Barracks myself after I've engineered a call or two. I'll have something like a good hot report to make to Steele and Joyce at headquarters, I expect. But speaking of passing up money, Fred, I said goodbye to a personal fortune once, you recall?"

"On the Great Falls and Canada?" presumed Provost. "Your bond, you mean?"

"Yes, but I wasn't bonded by the Great Falls and Canada Express Company," Milt enlarged. "Mine was a personal bond, furnished by the Hamiltons. My mother was a Hamilton, my grandmother an Arliss. That's how I got my fancy name: Hamilton Slade-Arliss—"

"Are you any relation of Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton?" Tucker broke in sharply.

"Sure," beamed Milt; "grand-nephew or second cousin, or something close. I'm not up on family relationship much, and I haven't seen Lockie, as we nicknamed him, very often since he came to Three Torches Town to lay out the survey of the place. Lockie was either busy with that same survey on his latest new C. P. R. townsite right under our hoofs.

here, or I was out on patrol."

"Then you know our Chief Lands Surveyor, Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton, well?" commented Rupert in a funny little murmur like a low, disgusted growl.

"Very well, indeed," smiled the Mounted man cheerfully. "Hamiltons. Arlisses. Slades. All one connection, and all well-to-do, especially the Hamiltons. You'll savvy how I wiped out my chunk of the Hamilton legacies when I paid my heavy bond. The G. F. & C. loot was never recovered."

"No, never discovered," brooded the Sweet Grass Sheriff. "American funds, at a whale of a good premium in Canada. It's not returned to U. S. A. dirt. Where in heck has the money been hiding all these ten years, do you suppose, Milt?"

"You guess, Fred," grinned Slade.

"Roaming," guessed Provost promptly; "roaming like the G. F. & C. outlaw.

"Cached," corrected the Constable.

"Cached!" the Sheriff scoffed. "Where in tarnation could it be cached for a decade? American funds. Premium climbing every day—almost. My gravel!"

"Lots of places," Milt shrugged as he gave Deerfoot the rein sign to proceed. "In a ranch. In real estate. In a newspaper. Most any Western cow city. Maybe Three Torches Town itself."

"To hear you talk, a man would think all you have to do, Milt, is lope round Three Torches Town and pick it up—it and the Overland Express funds, too," Fred Provost joked.

The Constable turned a wholly serious face round upon the Sheriff as they parted temporarily.



"I've simply got to, Fred," he vowed, "or lose my reputation, a Hamilton reputation, an Arliss reputation, a Slade reputation, all in one glorious mess. Yes, lose my reputation and leave the Force."

"Sam Steele that strict?" asked the Sheriff, unduly serious himself now.

"That strict, and stricter," the Constable told him. "I've staked everything with Steele. I've got to come through. So long till Barracks time, Fred."

Tail to tail with the Sheriff's sulphur, another thought struck Milt.

"The Macleod-Calgary-Edmonton Branch payroll on the Overland Express was in American funds like the G. F. & C. loot, Fred," he made it clearer. "The Great Falls and Canada Express Company financed those contractors of Tucker's company here. Isn't that right, Tucker?"

"Yes—yes," agreed Tucker, startled a bit, "now that I remember."

"And the G. F. & C. Express Company bonded the payroll messenger on the Overland as a sure-thing insurance on their own money shipments?" Milt cross-questioned, as if he had Tucker in a court of law. "Isn't that correct, Rupert?"

"Of course—of course," admitted Tucker, even his sharp legal mind slow to turn the tangles of the treasure trail the Mounted man was looping. "The Great Falls and Canada Express Company bonded the branch payroll, and what about that?"

"It's a good thing they did; it's flawless fine," Milt gloated on the wind after the Sheriff. "You see how it is, Fred? A one-to-a-thousand chance. The minute I pounce on the perambulating Overland loot, I find

where the missing Great Falls and Canada stuff is cached. It doesn't just bark like a dog at me. It howls like a coyote."

"You're more than a philanthropist, Milt," the Sweet Grass Sheriff chaffed.

"Yes, Fred. I grab double plunder and I get my own G. F. & C. payment back. I retrieve my personal Hamilton fortune, to say nothing of the name and the reputation. I've watched and waited nearly ten long years to do it. Why shouldn't I up and do it now? Tell me that."

"You're an optimist, into the bargain," grinned Provost. "I sure hope your luck holds. See you at the Barracks."

The Constable and Tucker loped on rapidly to pick up the ground they had lost on Alice Marlow ahead of them, but they saw they could hardly overtake her before she made the River Street cottage.

Ahead of Alice herself they saw the *Northwest Star* paper delivery boys Izzy and Sol Bloomgarter finishing up their morning route on the street, down where the squatters had built the last few cottages on the switch strip on the strength of Lester Carr's option and his Old Man Subdivision.

The hawking cries of Izzy and Sol drifted stridently to the Mounted man and his companion, and the boot echoes of the two enthusiastic, industrious boys rattled against the outermost frame-shacks as they raced over the loose single-plank sidewalks and ran up and down boxed-in steps.

Milt could see Izzy's curly black hair shaking as he ran to beat his brother to the finish, his agate eyes flashing, beak nose stuck out, swarthy features laugh-

ing derisively, looking like a sinewy, yellow-legged dirt track runner in his blue blouse, short pants and tennis boots without any socks in them.

Sol's fat body, encased in a yellow sweater and blue overalls rolled up onto his swelling calves, bent forward as he strained ahead, his little portly stomach quivering and the gay Indian-made moccasins on his feet kicking up a dust that wreathed a solemn owl face, broad-nosed, wide-mouthed, brown-eyed. The wreathing cloud about him, prairie dust of the outskirts as deep, as light and as capricious as wood ashes, settled on his dark, straight, brushed-back hair, filming it gray as his oily, zinc-colored skin.

"Extra! Extra!" Izzy yelled. "Buy a paper, everybody. Morning edition! All about the big Overland Express robbery."

"Extra!" Sol supported him. "One-hundred-thousand-dollar hold-up. All about Jack Marlow, outlaw."

Mrs. Marlow heard the newsboys also, and with a catch of breath urged her chestnut on to head them off from the new Marlow cottage. She did not want Muriel and Aunt Flo to glimpse that sensational paper before she could break the news in a better manner herself.

Unconsciously crossing her purpose, Izzy and Sol were too swift for the chestnut at the street's lumber-piled end. They reached the vicinity of the cottage before Sol thought about it all at once.

Then he slacked abruptly.

"Hey, Izzy," he warned, "that's their own cottage. You ain't gonna leave a paper on their step today, are you, fellah?"

"Why ain't I?" exulted Izzy, winner in the delivery

race. "I allus drops one here. What's the matter with you, Sol?"

"That's the Marlow cottage, Izzy. Better skip it for this once, stupid."

"And git fired by old Mat Speedwell for skipping with his paper?" demanded Izzy. "Not for me, Sol. Down she goes."

Izzy thumped the rolled-up paper on the step before he fully comprehended his brother's meaning and warning to hold off.

"Gosh! Sol," he exploded almost instantly, "that is the Marlow cottage."

"And Muriel Marlow opening the door to git that darned paper," croaked Sol. "Her father, Izzy. We gotta beat it."

The sound of their steps running away echoed back from wooden walls with redoubled clatter.

They dodged round Alice Marlow's chestnut.

"And Mrs. Marlow coming home to read it, too," gasped Izzy. "You can kick me a heap, square behind, Sol."

In their headlong retreat, when they cleared the chestnut, the newsboys almost bumped into Slade's Deerfoot, into Tucker's slatey range pony closing the gap on the chestnut.

Izzy and Sol avoided the sprinting pair of horses by a wild dive.

"Here comes the Mounted," Izzy gulped in sudden apprehension.

"With Tucker, that railway law slinger," identified Sol. "Something nasty doing. Beat it, faster than ever, Izzy."

## CHAPTER XXV.

MERELY jarring the cottage door to pick up the *Northwest Star*, and without looking out the length of River Street, Muriel Marlow turned with Izzy Bloomgarter's newspaper roll in her hand to her Aunt Flo.

"Today's paper, Aunt Flo," she announced cheerfully. "I wonder if there are any new town jobs offered. I might get something fresh."

"Oh! Izzy and Sol are round early this morning," commented Aunt Flo. "I thought I heard them making more noise than usual. Yelling 'Extra,' I imagine. But then, that's an old trick of theirs. Two smart boys, Muriel. Ought to own Mat Speedwell's paper yet."

"I'll look at his ads," proposed Muriel a little bitterly. "Mother thought the other day she was well enough to come home, so you really won't need me here to get things settled in place after she comes, Aunt Flo."

"Don't you let Court hear you say that," Muriel, after him riding over from our Three Northwest Torches Ranches at daylight to help with some of the heavy things we moved. Court's just gone out the back door again for a minute to hobble his pony Soapy there in the back yard. Musn't mention jobs when he steps in once more. Makes Court humping mad when he sees you have to work."

Muriel opened up the paper.

"All right," she agreed, "we'll not discuss it before Court."

Aunt Flo watched Muriel interestedly while she unfolded the *Northwest Star* and smoothed out the creases preparatory to reading.

"Any special news, Muriel?" she asked. "Mat Speedwell is sure to feature Jack's eluding the Mounted and his mysterious disappearance."

Muriel exclaimed suddenly, amazedly.

"My Heavens!" she cried. "Aunt Flo, look. Court, come here and look."

At sight of the consternation in Muriel's face, Flo Marlow stepped swiftly to her niece's side.

At the strident note in the girl's voice, Court came running in through the back-doorway from his hobbling of Soapy.

"My brother Jack," Flo Marlow burst out. "Your daddy, Muriel. Hold up. It can't be Jack."

Muriel was reading indignantly.

"The paper says it is," she stormed. "There's dad's picture and his description, the description of the robber. It tallies exactly."

Court Baker stared over her shoulder.

"Outlaw, they're calling him—Mat Speedwell's organ is branding him," Court growled. "Mat had better hold his horses or I'll ride over there with the T. N. T. boys and tip his new press into Old Man River. Who in thunder's coming now, at the front door? Riding hell-for-leather, licketty-bang-bang? Stand back a minute, Muriel."

The thunder of the chestnut's hoofs was shaking the door Court pushed open, the gravel from its shoes spattering the panels. Court felt for the butt of his gun in the holster under his coat.

But he released his gun grip as a woman's figure

flung off at the step.

"Mrs. Marlow," he cried, only half believing, "or—  
or your riding ghost!"

"Mother!" gasped Muriel.

"Riding!" shrieked Aunt Flo.

"To Montana, with you all," nodded Alice Marlow  
vigorously. "When do we leave?"

The sound of the other two horses, Deerfoot and the slate, pulling up behind the chestnut, echoed in the open doorway. While mother and daughter hugged each other for one electric moment, whispering together over the *Northwest Star*, Montana, the round-up waiting on the T. N. T., the River Street cottage and a dozen hinging things all in the same breath, Aunt Flo stood by them peering at the two riders dismounting so hurriedly.

"Goodness!" Flo Marlow exclaimed. "Here comes Rupert Tucker with Constable Slade. Tucker's got the *Northwest Star*, too."

Muriel and her mother abruptly broke their hug, and Muriel whirled angrily to meet the newcomers on the doorsill as their boots rumbled over the box-step at the entrance.

"That's far enough for you, Rupert," Muriel challenged pointedly. "After what mother has told me, you don't come into this cottage."

Tucker took off his bowler hat apologetically, wiping his sweating forehead with a gray silk handkerchief.

"Why, Muriel," he began to placate her, "I'm terribly sorry. This Overland hold-up business is—"

Court Baker pushed into it, sneeringly, interrupting Tucker to the accompaniment of an explosive

snap of his fingers.

"It's your fault, Turkey Trail Tucker," Court introduced his amendment, "if we call a spade a dirty son-of-a-shovel and a scheming law-shark a—"

Constable Slade broke in on Court, pinching his arm with a twinge of caution, while he pushed past the T. N. T. foreman into the room.

"Steady, Court—steady, everybody," he admonished. "We don't want any more trouble on hand than we've got heaped up already."

He smiled humorously at Muriel, who secretly examined his eyes somewhat anxiously for possible after-effects of the soap suds.

"You don't mind me coming in, Muriel?" he joked her. "Am I included in that barring? If so, I'll have to flash a warrant on you."

"No, you know you're always welcome, Milt," she laughed, her temper breaking at his whimsical mood, "and a good neighbor, a fellow to be trusted—which puts you under the Sign of the Three Torches."

"But Constable, don't you allow Tucker to give interviews to the *Northwest Star* that brand my brother Jack an outlaw," Florence Marlow protested.

"Outlaw, yes," her sister-in-law Alice echoed. "Just suppose—ridiculously—that Jack was an outlaw at this moment. He'd only have taken back a little of his own."

"A very little," Flo Marlow emphasized. "One hundred thousand dollars is a small part of the million-dollar Three Torches Town boom of Tucker's that he's had Lester Carr subdivide out of the old home range. Why, we paid one thousand dollars for this tiny cottage."



Tucker answered sullenly, outraged at being held in leash on the doorstep.

"You paid one thousand dollars too much," he intimated bluntly. "No use in me floundering round the buffalo wallow about it. This is Lester Carr's smart dealing, and all on his own. You've only squatter's rights, as the ground is railroad land—switch right-of-way, to be precise. Don't all look at me as if I was a rattler on the *stoep*. The company gave me these orders, here, to assist—assist, mind you—the squatters off."

Aunt Flo gaped at him.

"My Heavens!" she heaved ponderously, as if in a sudden stroke of asthma. "My great, western-starred Heavens! Listen to him."

"What next?" cried Muriel. "Is he ly—concocting about conditions, Milt?"

"No, I'm sorry, Muriel," Slade informed her, "but it's right enough. The railroad development's building towns just about as fast as paint dries."

Court broke bounds again, denouncing Tucker to his angry, red face.

"You confounded flimflammer, Tucker. You're worse than any roaming outlaw. Get to blazes out of here. You'll not serve any notice on Muriel, Aunt Flo or Jack's wife. I'll wipe River Street with you."

Court made a jump for Rupert, but the Constable grabbed him, wrestling him back from the step.

"Let me at that co-grafter with Les Carr and Company, Milt," Court pleaded.

"Cool down, Court," Milt ordered him. "None of that wiping business. I'd only have to jail you for assault, you know."

Milt's mouth was close to Court's ear as they wrestled, so Milt whispered into it a further piece of caution and wise advice.

"Ice that temper of yours, Court. Nothing to it, I tell you. And you savvy darn well that the women-folk need somebody loose to look after them now."

Court subsided.

"Sure, Milt, sure—that's gospel true," he admitted, and listened without violence to Tucker's injunction.

"Of course," Rupert tried to clarify it to the three ladies, "you don't have to move right away. Maybe you wouldn't have to move at all if I could fix it up—make some compromise for you. Eh, Muriel?"

Muriel looked at him without enthusiasm for any form of delay.

"There'll be no compromise with us," she decided instantly. "I'm speaking for mother and Aunt Flo as well as myself."

"No, no compromise," her mother voted beside Muriel, facing the issue swiftly. "We'll take our loss."

"Like we took this newspaper slam," vowed Aunt Flo. "Outlaw! Rupert Tucker, if you don't make Mat Speedwell retract that, I'll—"

Aunt Flo's threat was confused with the crunching of wheels at the door.

Court Baker looked out.

"Why, it's the stage," he announced. "Lou Gates back from Coyote Crossing. With the mail and the express."

He squinted at the trio of women behind the Constable's back.

"Keep a tight mouth, folks," he whispered to them. "Watch your words of welcome."

"Day, everybody," yelled Lou Gates cheerily. "No matter where I look I see a red uniform these times—or the Sweet Grass Sheriff's star."

"See any at Coyote Crossing, Lou?" asked Court Baker significantly.

"Yep," answered Lou sarcastically. "lots of them, chasing somebody that somebody else said was an outlaw, or something like that. But what's amiss here?"

Muriel laughed it off scornfully.

"We're squatters, Lou," she explained, "just getting notified by Rupert Tucker's corporation to pack up again and keep camping."

Lou spluttered explosively, trying to get rid of his tobacco all at once in order to do his crisp delivery justice!

"Old Turkey Trail Track, incorporated new, must have a teeny grudge against you, Muriel," he spouted quite belligerently. "I heard over the wire at Coyote Crossing as they suspended, I hope—"

"Sacked," corrected Muriel flatly, with an emphasis that made Tucker, still on the step, fidget uneasily.

"A slip of the Morse code," grinned Lou, his temper never pegged for long. "Sacked you, as lunch girl. Dirty, doggone luck, that. But maybe I'm freighting you some better luck along. Here's a stage express delivery card in your mail. Parcel's in the load I dumped at our Calgary-Macleod-Lethbridge Stage Coach Lines Office next to Three Torches Railway Station down Main Street a ways yonder."

Lou pointed with his whip, backwards on his route, past Rupert Tucker's nose, making his announcement pompously, as if to show the railroad executive that the stage was still doing business, not only in postal

carriage but in express shipments from places untouched by the steel.

Then Lou handed Muriel the card, carefully, officially still under Tucker's nose.

Muriel smiled at Lou's ceremony of impressing the rival road.

"Express collect, Lou?" she interrogated naively as she took the pasteboard notice.

Lou smiled too, broadly, in the warmth of his deep friendliness.

"Nope, prepaid, Muriel."

"What is it, mail order stuff from the Winnipeg department store?" she guessed.

"Dunno, Muriel. It ain't marked. But you can ride down there with me if you like. I'm driving back to the stage express office. Got a card of my own to slip in, a card for a new bunch of mail bags. There's wear and tear on sacks on the stage run, you bet."

Court Baker scented the chance for information and nodded briskly to Mrs. Marlow and Aunt Flo.

"You better hop up with Lou in Muriel's stead, Aunt Flo," he proposed. "Rest of us will ride the ponies. It's your opportunity to find out what Lou knows—if he knows anything."

"All right, I'll go along with Lou," agreed Aunt Flo, climbing up.

Alice Marlow's chestnut had chummed with Muriel's sparkling Sunup and Court's Soapy over the backyard boundary.

"Wait a minute," called Alice Marlow, as Court brought the three horses round to the step. "Wait till I lock our—I mean, the company's door."

She grated the key in the new, stiff lock.

The Constable looked inquiringly at Rupert Tucker as the three mounted and followed Lou's stage rolling down River Street.

"I didn't notice you serve any injunction, or notice, or eviction order, or anything at all," Milt reminded him.

"It's in my pocket," snapped Tucker angrily. "It stays there. I'm not a fool. Didn't Mrs. Marlow lock our door? So I don't need to serve."

Milt nodded thoughtfully, watching the beautiful picture Muriel made on glossy Sunup.

"In that case, Tucker, we're finished here," he observed. "Which way you heading now?"

"My next appointment's with Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton," Rupert confided. "Report that the River Street switch is all cleared up. Which way you riding?"

"Your way. I'd better make a few more enquiries around the station myself: I didn't hear any vocal breaks here. All the talk apparently was straight-forward-honest. But you never can tell."

"Smell anything?" asked Tucker speculatively.

"Maybe, but I'm not specifying."

"All right, we'll ride after them if you think you can pick up a lead down there," Tucker sided with him.

The lawyer straddled his slatey range pony.

The Constable jumped on Deerfoot.

By the time the stage and the three riders ahead of them had turned from River Street into Main and reached the express office next to the station, Milt and Tucker had almost caught up with them.

Court Baker looked back calculatingly as he swung

off with Muriel and her mother and Lou stopped the coach with Aunt Flo at the office door.

He whispered another word of caution.

"Don't brag any., Milt and Rupert are riding close, right behind, but they can't overhear a quick confession, Lou."

"Yes, tell us something now, Lou, before we go into the office," urged Aunt Flo anxiously.

"And hurry," begged Muriel's mother tensely. "What do you know about the Overland hold-up, Lou?"

"Not a thing," Lou declared. "I dropped Jack where you said, at Coyote Crossing. Staff Wylie was waiting for us there behind the water tank with the ponies, Badger and Biter. So I kept on to my last stop at Blasted Pine Forks. When I swung back-trail today, a dozen Coyote Crossing citizens tell me eighteen times about the stick-up of the Overland Express."

"And you didn't see dad at all afterwards, Lou?" cried Muriel.

"No, Muriel, or I sure would have been gathered in on suspicion. I made myself scarce around Coyote Crossing, you bet. Managed a fast run out of it this morning, too."

"You didn't take time off to do that polishing job of yours on Staff?" inquired Court Baker.

"No, I didn't even speak to Staff. My stage wheels hardly stopped rolling while Jack made his dive from under my mail sacks for the ponies. Did Staff get back to Three Northwest Torches Ranch, Court?"

"Yeh!" Court answered. "Late. I was sitting up for Staff by our one lone campfire. You'll notice, Lou, that the other two fires are out."

Lou scowled across the horizon, jiggling his sombrero understandingly.

"Yep!" he croaked. "I spied only a single smoke twist out yonder. Did Staff have no news?"

"Same report as you about the hold-up, Lou—not a thing."

Lou snorted disgustedly.

"Could you pry news out of a poker-faced, royal-flush card dealer like Staff Wylie, even if he had news?" he demanded of Court.

"It's your ante, Lou," smiled Court wisely. "Now we better get Muriel's express and light out of here. This station brings back soapy memories to me."

Court waved them swiftly into the stage coach office while Tucker and the Mounted man got out of their saddles.

Inside the office, Cal Dover, the red-faced, pansy-eyed young express clerk, thumped the books open and shut while he hunted the yellow record pages for way-back entries people were clamoring about; his eyeshade sticking up on top of his riotous brown hair like a girl's Spanish comb, and a long purple pencil javelined behind his ear. Cal nodded genially.

"Next," he called out politely. "I guess it's your turn, Miss Muriel."

Muriel felt a sudden diffidence come over her, some restraint almost as compelling as an inhibition.

Perhaps it was her innate Western hunch.

Perhaps it was the prescience of the prairie she had imbibed for years.

She hesitated strangely.

"Maybe you're in a hurry, Lou," she suggested. "If you want to go next, I can wait a minute."

"No, you go ahead, Muriel," urged Lou, pushing her forward along the counter. "Mine's only fresh mail bags. Old ones got wagon scuffed."



## CHAPTER XXVI.

CAL DOVER played the hunch for her.

He reached over the express office counter and took her notice.

"Your card, Miss Muriel," Cal invited. "Yes, that's it. Sign here."

Muriel neatly inscribed her name.

The ink flowed smoothly.

There was no drag or scratch in the pen point.

Cal Dover's vigorous routine appeared to have lifted whatever was hanging over her.

"That all, Cal?" she asked.

"Thank you, Miss Muriel. Yes, that's all. It's prepaid. Taking it with you? O.K.—you'll get it at that nearest wicket."

"But just what is it, Cal?" ventured Muriel. "Do you know? Any idea about it?"

"Don't know for sure, Miss Muriel," the busy Cal stated. "Looks from here about the size and shape of one of those Prairie Rose Soap-boxes. I wouldn't be surprised if Lou, here, got tired carrying them in his mail and started to express them."

The joke on him, Lou edged along the counter, laughing, to take Muriel's place.

"I'm next, Cal. Bunch of mail bags. Watch out you don't get your head in one."

"Yes, or let the cats jump out," Cal chuckled.

"Yonder they are, Lou. They came in a roll, too big for the wicket. So I'll heave them over the counter to you. Catch."

Lou caught the bags as they thumped across.

"That's the lot," Cal checked up. "Sign for them there. Say, wasn't it a whale of a note about the Overland hold-up last night? How does Coyote Crossing feel about it?"

The stage driver grinned.

"Pretty empty in the pocket, Cal. Pretty short on the drinks. A good many Coyote Crossing fellows were on that lifted payroll."

"Ho-hoh-hol!" gurgled Cal. "They were, eh? I'm glad the train was past Three Torches Town before it was cleaned out. Well, so long, Lou."

Lou armed up his new bags.

"You folks through at that other wicket?" he asked the ladies and Court.

Muriel smiled brightly.

"Yes, Lou, I got mine."

"A mystery package," chattered Aunt Flo excitedly.

"Wrapped perfectly plain and tied with heavy cord," commented Muriel's mother, examining it curiously.

Court Baker good-humoredly produced his knife.

"Here," he offered, "I'll cut the lariat loops off it, Muriel."

Lou Gates pinched it tentatively while Court cut away the string.

"Cal guessed about right," Lou figured, "because it does look the size and shape of them Prairie Rose Soap boxes cluttering up my mail every day. Unwraps just like the cussed things, too. By thunder, it sure is a Prairie Rose box."

"Yeh! must be," Court wagered, "that schoolgirl complexion stuff of yours, Muriel. No eyewash, this time. Cheek wash."

Muriel was breathless as she opened the lid.

"But it isn't soap," she cried. "~~It's bills—money.~~  
Good land."

Aunt Flo stared in greater agitation than ever.

"Somebody sent you a fortune by mistake, Muriel?"

she ventured. "A cash box from the factory?"

Muriel shook her head helplessly.

"Count it, Court," she begged. "I can't."

Court flashed up a warning hand, stopping her like a semaphore.

"Not here, Muriel," he vetoed instantly. "Where are the Constable and Tucker?"

"They ain't in sight," reported Lou. "They're gone through the station archway. Come on out into the freight shed corridor. There's nobody handy there."

They all furtively followed Lou into the outer hallway of the freight section which formed a loading chute for hand trucks.

"I'll shut the door," breathed Aunt Flo heavily.

She shoved the sliding door into place.

"Stand against it, Florence," Mrs. Marlow gave the directions, "and if anyone comes, Muriel, you hide the box away in a hurry."

"Count, Court," Muriel invited. "I sure couldn't. I'm weak. Goodness gracious!"

Court started counting in a whisper.

"Fifty-dollar bills, two hundred in a package—makes ten thousand dollars," he calculated swiftly. "And ten packages, in a neat row like soap cakes in this Prairie Rose box—makes one hundred thousand dollars. No name. Nothing. Oh! hold on, here's a card in the bottom of the box."

"Let me see, Court," cried Muriel.

She grabbed the pasteboard anxiously.

"Why, it's one of your Toe Cork Lunchroom station menu cards, Muriel," identified her quick-sighted Aunt Flo Marlow.

"Yes, yesterday's menu card—look at the date," her mother pointed out. "And something scribbled on the back. What are those words?"

Muriel read them in a gasp: "Two cups of coffee—hot—and a couple of sandwiches."

"That's one way of sending a letter," observed Court Baker sagely.

"You think so?" questioned Muriel.

"Sure, it's from Jack," Lou Gates put in. "Nobody else would have written that. In a code, like."

Muriel nodded in nervous agreement.

"From dad, yes, it must be," she was forced to admit. "And that means he's sent this—this loot from the Overland. Stolen money—no bones about that. Oh! Aunt Flo, mother, you know we need it, but we're not the kind to keep it."

"My, my, no, Muriel," Aunt Flo murmured hoarsely in her consternation, "we can't touch it."

"No, get it back to the company at once before somebody finds us with it," pleaded her mother, in a torment of uncertainty, still loyally believing in Jack, but with no means of explaining away the gift of the condemning money.

"But how?" demanded Muriel.

Lou Gates scratched his head under the brown sombrero.

"That's the painful problem," he mumbled. "The money was sent pretty slick, if you notice. Passed through nobody's hands, you can take your oath on

it. If you folks wanted to keep it, nobody would be any wiser."

Muriel drew a deep breath, audible, sibilant.

"Gosh, Lou, don't tempt us!" she exclaimed. "One hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"And I guess it really is ours by rights," her mother reminded them all. "However, back home pronto it goes."

"Oh, certainly," puffed Aunt Flo. "Get it out of our sight. I'd faint if anybody came scooting through that doorway."

Aunt Flo gave an alarmed jump as she spoke, rattling the sliding door with her start, for footsteps sounded in the archway of the station.

"There's somebody now," grumbled Court. "Don't faint Aunt Flo. Brace up! That's only the Constable and Rupert Tucker."

Lou Gates shoved the sliding door open part way and looked out anxiously as Flo Marlow backed away in trepidation.

"Milt and Tucker have stopped," he told the others. "Stopped to talk under the arch. You hadn't better risk passing them that close with the box. Come on out this other way."

Muriel was now thoroughly frightened.

"Which way, Lou?" she asked, all rattled.

"See that L-passage off yon end of the freight chute?" the stage driver pointed out. "Well, it runs past the Chief Lands Surveyor's Office, past Lauchlan Alexander Hamilton's hangout, where he keeps his shiny instruments and dog-eared plans on file, in the station annex yonder between the Toe Cork Lunch and my stage depot."

Muriel nodded desperately, ready to leap in any direction for concealment with the Prairie Rose Soap box she squeezed so tightly that the lid dented under her fingertips.

"Yes, Lou, yes, I remember now."

"We better fade out that way, Muriel, with the folks. Before we make Main Street, we'll see what to do with the box."

"Chief Hamilton, yeh, he's one of the high-up men, a director," enthused Court Baker. "By thunder, Muriel, now you've decided to return the box to the company, that's the place to slip it in—Hamilton's office, yeh, sure."

"Mr. Hamilton's private office, yes, that might be a good place," Muriel considered the chance; "if we could do it unnoticed. I liked his attitude at dad's trial, so fair and everything. In his evidence he was very clear-cut about the rules and regulations for land grants and the railway's full compensation for necessary appropriations."

"So Hamilton was," Court agreed with her. "I heard him myself the while I was in. He seemed to favor Jack an awful lot with straightforward statements, but Magistrate Holt had it in for Jack, you bet. Hamilton's evidence should have squared everything, and it's a shining wonder if his Chief Lands Surveyor's far-squinting eye doesn't discover one of Rupert Tucker's dirty tricks some of these fine days."

"Sure a marvel, Court," Lou Gates coincided. "Hamilton is a square-shooter, all right. If he ever does uncover one of Tucker's cooked-up deals, he'll dump the pot in Rupert's face."

"But it's a risky time to approach Mr. Hamilton

with our complaints just now," objected Aunt Flo Marlow nervously.

"Too risky, yep," Lou decided. "Don't try to get his ear quite so soon. Wait a spell. See him later about a little investigation on the side."

"That's logic—later," advised Court, "when all the fuss has died down."

"But right here and now Muriel needs to get rid of the box," persisted the girl's mother.

"Leave out yon menu card," was Lou's shrewd suggestion, "and we'll drop the box in Hamilton's mail slot in his door. The door's marked: PRIVATE."

Court grabbed the box impulsively from the restless hands of Muriel:

"You've a head under that old sombrero, Lou," Court exulted. "We'll do just that little trick—and then watch for more headlines in Mat Speedwell's *Northwest Star*. Come on, folks: I hear the Constable and Tucker getting leg uneasy out there."

The boot scrapings of the Mounted man and the lawyer taking a step and halting, starting and stopping again for some apparently deeply debated words of conversation, rumbled hollowly in the station arch over their heads.

"Come fast, folks," urged Court, striding off with the money box.

"Yes, hurry, everybody," breathed Muriel. "It doesn't bother you, mother? You're all fit?"

"Absolutely fit," her mother declared. "Steady as an old round-up pony, tough as the old T. N. T. brand, my daughter. This is the Hamilton office ahead, isn't it, dear?"

"Yes, mother, that's his sign: CHIEF LANDS SUR-

VEYOR—see? Right in front. Golly, I hope we don't bump into anyone. Do it slick, Court, as we amble by the entrance."

Lou Gates, with a tenseness odd in him, pointed out the spot to deliver.

"That's Hamilton's door, Court. The one with the mail slot. Drop your soap box, quick, and we'll beat it to the horses and the stage."

Court reached out swiftly, surreptitiously, noiselessly opening the metal mail slot.

"A darn tight fit, folks," he whispered. "Hard to shove it in."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Muriel, "the door's swinging open. Hold on, Court."

The Hamilton door marked PRIVATE was jerked wide from within.

One of the Chief's surveying staff, Bill Todd, still in his 'teens, tanned, alert, athletic, his transit on his shoulder, plunged through in answer to a hurry-up call from the gang somewhere uptown.

"Sorry, I didn't see you," the young transit man Todd apologized.

Bill held the door wide open a moment with the spikes of his tripod as a little courtesy to make their entry easier.

Through the gaping doorway they saw Hamilton himself bending over his plan-papered, instrument-littered table, backed by blue-printed walls perforated with long rows of tall window frames, blindless and huge, sparkingly clear, like an artist's studio glass array. His busy outgoing staff surrounded him, consulting with a last-minute look the projected survey he jabbed for their benefit with his eloquent



forefinger while they wiped off their theodolites and nodded understandingly one by one as they followed Bill Todd.

"Mr. Hamilton's in," gasped Aunt Flo. "Now I will faint for sure."

"Don't collapse, Aunt Flo," pleaded Court. "Stiffen up. Remember I'm still clutching this consarned box."

The last of Hamilton's staff passed them, hesitating there so uncertainly; carefree, laughing line-runners of the West—rod men, chain men, transit men, axe men, stake men, all.

Bill Todd still held the door open for them.

"Your turn," Bill told them, his eyes dancing, his boyish features bright with his enthusiasm for the luring work ahead. "Not often you catch the Chief so free. Go on in."

Lou Gates took young Bill Todd's boyish glow as some kind of omen.

He stared at Bill for half a second and had a daring hunch.

"Follow the mail man, folks," Lou took the plunge, and beckoned them all after him as he jogged in on his thumping heels.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

EVEN in his preoccupation over the plans, Hamilton heard the familiar rattle of the mail slot and straightened up expectantly, his sinewy, trail-hardened figure alert, bronzed face beaming friendliness, the far-ranging eyes full of welcome. With the characteristic commanding motion of squaring his shoulders, he tossed his head, whipping back the forelock tangle of hair that had drooped with his close inspection into his keen line of sight.

Recognizing the stage driver following hard on his distinctive signal, the Chief Lands Surveyor laughed cheerfully, a good-fellow, comradely spirit bursting from his jovial cheek wrinkles with a radiance positively brilliant.

"Hello, Lou," he called out vibrantly, in a voice deep, earnest, mellowed with an honest gladness at the meeting-up. "Any mail for me today—painless pill boxes, overweight letters, Doctor Cure-It almanacs with all the zodiac signs that interest star-gazing night owls like myself?"

For once Lou was tongue-tied, his humor stuck in his corded throat.

"Nope—yep—that is," Lou began. "I mean, I—we—they—"

Then Hamilton recognized the group trailing the stage driver and waved at them hospitably, a sweeping, come-on gesture that embraced the three ladies and Court Baker with the Prairie Rose Soap box in his worried grip.

"Oh, yes, Lou," he took it for granted, "you've

brought somebody along, some friends to see me. Eh? Sure enough. Why, if it isn't Muriel Marlow, and Mrs. Marlow and Aunt Flo Marlow. Yes, and our old friend Court. Come right ahead, you folks. Don't back up at that PRIVATE sign. Got to have something to stop the hoboes—tie-trampers; ride-the-rodders and such. Hello, Court, old-timer—put her there!"

He clapped palms with Court, not the morning-coated, Vandyked greeting of the dignified director, but the glad-handed, bare-armed grip of a fellow worker with his sleeves rolled up and his brown drill field jacket hung on a peg behind his chair.

"Sure, Hamilton, good and hard," chuckled Court, "and don't think the Marlows and me are coming gunning for you with a lot of hard feelings, that is—personally."

"No, I hope not," smiled Hamilton, "even after the Three Torches Town court-session. That affair was too bad. Too bad, altogether. Also this Overland Express business makes it worse. I suppose it's about that hold-up you people want to see me; eh?"

Aunt Flo held her breath a moment and then burst into excuses.

"Gracious, Mr. Hamilton— I— I don't know, at this time. Maybe you've appointments. Maybe you're too busy to see us."

"Not too busy to see you ladies," returned Hamilton gallantly. "Not too busy to talk to friends. If I can help you in any way, don't be a bit backward in asking me. Come and sit down. You, too, Court. Come on and squat."

"Oh! Well, I guess they hardly need me," hedged

Court, affecting a great carelessness. "I'll just stroll along with Lou and roll a smoke outside."

Muriel looked at him in alarm.

"Court, please don't go. Wait here, won't you?"

Court paused uncertainly.

"All right, Muriel, I'll wait; then, on the step, if you want me to."

"No step about it, Court," the genial Hamilton bluffed him. "Come on with the rest. I have some extra chairs here. Everybody can sit down awhile. By the way, Court, I was just going to ask you if you were peddling soap with that soapy looking box in your hand?"

"No, sirree," spluttered Court, "it's Prairie Rose—Muriel's Prairie Rose."

Hamilton laughed teasingly at Muriel.

"You, too, Muriel?" he bantered. "One of my own relatives—niece of mine, uses that. She's going to college in Manitoba and I send it to her right along. She'd rather have it than flowers or candy."

Aunt Flo plainly was becoming flustered, her knees threatening to weaken under her.

"Goodness," she sighed, "well—do let us sit down a minute. Maybe it'll be best. I don't know what's fretting me, but I seem a little overdone."

Muriel turned to her solicitously.

"Just how are you feeling, Aunt Flo?" she murmured in anxiety. "Remember mother's collapse. Watch your own heart."

"Yes, Florence, take it easy," cautioned Muriel's mother, her nerve and heart apparently the better of the two.

Aunt Flo braved it out, stirring herself as if deter-

mined to throw off her sinking spell.

"Shucks, I'm all right, Muriel—all O.K., Alice," she declared. "Just excited a bit, that's all. It'll pass when I sit down."

Hamilton had jumped to get the extra chairs and to place one quickly for Aunt Flo.

"Yes, rest yourself, Aunt Flo," he begged, pushing her into it. "You're no light fairy on your feet, you can take it from me. Have a chair, everyone. You, into the bargain, Lou—if you can spare a jiffy from your stage route."

Lou held up his new roll of mail bags, conspicuous as Court's soap box.

"Thanks, Hamilton, thanks, but I'll sure be going," Lou demurred. "These here are new sacks, you savvy. I got to get the postoffice to lock them as they go out on the run."

Hamilton pointed affably toward the corridor that right-angled off the passageway outside.

"Put them in at the postal wicket yonder, Lou," he advised. "The railway mail clerk's there, sorting. He'll lock them for you. Then you come right back here. We're all going to have a confab together. You know the wicket as well as I do—right down where I see Rupert Tucker standing, there, with Constable Milt Slade."

Lou wheeled abruptly and sighted like a deer hunter down the corridor.

"Constable Slade—Tucker," Lou echoed. "Yep, I notice them now. That station postal box, sure—I plumb forgot about it. O.K., I'll be back, chasing myself from there. Hold your conference a minute."

Down in the right-angle Lou negotiated, the

Mounted man and Tucker were conversing in cautious tones.

"Don't poke your face round this pillar, Rupert," Milt restrained the lawyer. "Stand partly out of sight and we can see all that's necessary without being spotted ourselves—much. By thunder, there they go right into Loekie Hamilton's office."

Tucker plunged half past the pillar in an irritable alarm.

"But they can't camp half a day, maybe, talking to Hamilton," Rupert protested. "I have an appointment with him first. I simply got to—"

The scuffle of Lou's hurrying boots interrupted Tucker, and Lou's shoulders, shaving the turn, bumped into the solicitor's craning figure. Lou backed from the sudden collision somewhat angrily.

"What the blazes is the matter with you fellows, sneaking around dangerous corners on all fours?" he demanded. "Shadowing somebody?"

Tucker's bowler hat was rocked into the air, but Rupert juggled it deftly as a bowling ball. Next he put one hand to his midsection.

"My stomach—look out!" he roared wrathfully at Lou's recoiling bulk. "Go slow there, Lou, and you'll get along a lot farther in your delivery."

The Constable laughed at the lawyer's feat.

"Everybody's taking a whack at you today, Tucker," he chaffed him. "But where you dodging so fast and gophery, Lou?"

Lou poised pompously.

"Chief's orders," he explained. "I got a special delivery of Prairie Rose Soap from him. Sending it to that college girl niece of his, Manitoba-way. Regis-

tered mail. Air-sealed, too, to protect the schoolgirl fragrance, you savvy."

Tucker stared at Lou, evidently suspecting him of fabricating glibly about his orders and his headlong dive through the corridor.

"Why, this stage driver Gates is crazy," he remarked irascibly to the Constable.

Milt was laughing still, watching Lou retreat toward the Chief Lands Surveyor's door closing in the corridor's distance.

"Lou's some comedian when he starts," Milt chuckled. "Just look at him, Rupert, making mighty medicine man signs before that closed door."

"I know Lou's lying about that Prairie Rose Soap business," Tucker cried jealously, "and I know blame well he can't open Hamilton's private door."

Milt's chuckle grew deeper.

"But Lou is opening it, Rupert," he pointed out as the stage driver posed in pantomime in the Chief's gaping doorway, making a contemptuous gesture towards the two men outside.

"Condemn Lou," growled Tucker, "he has no call to fan his fingers in my face."

Lou banged the door shut with quite unnecessary loudness.

The Mounted man continued to plague his companion with highly facetious comment.

"Lockie Hamilton's a great fellow, even if he is a relative of mine. Nothing high-hat about Lockie. Gives all his staff and the employees a friendly dig in the ribs. Rides right in the caboose or the engine cab and yarns with the driver and the fireman on the run. And you know very well, Rupert, that the

board of directors—the whole railway executive—hangs on his advice.”

“Yes, I know they do,” admitted Tucker sullenly, “and I know Hamilton does all that. But—”

“But what, Rupert?”

Tucker shook a defiant fist, probably in answer to Lou’s rankling finger-flirt.

His expression was severe and his gold-adorned glasses shot flashes like a heliograph as he indignantly swung his head from side to side.

“But you mustn’t let that interview go on in there behind closed doors, Constable,” he decreed.

“I’ve no orders from Superintendent Sam Steele to stop people talking,” refused Constable Slade.

Tucker whirled angrily.

“Then I’ll stop it myself,” he resolved.

He jumped away, as if released from a spring, dashing straight for Hamilton’s private entrance.

Milt Slade followed, grinning, as was his duty, to keep the peace.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

INSIDE that door, Lou had turned the catch so that it was locked and he stood there a moment, whistling softly in his satisfaction.

"Well, I'm back again," he announced, "a little under ten seconds flat."

Hamilton beckoned him forward.

"You win, Lou," he laughed, "when I'm not running against you. Come on and sit down here by the end of my table. Now we're all here. Where do we begin in this Marlow-railroad tangle?"

Court and Muriel were talking already in low tones about the mysterious express parcel.

"Muriel, I've figured hard on this thing, and I believe it's our best chance to tell Hamilton straight out the truth about the box," Court advised her earnestly.

"Maybe so, Court," she nodded. "Yes, I think you're right at that. It's a better way of going about it than dropping it, unknown-like, in his mail slot with his private mail. Eh, Aunt Flo?"

Aunt Flo quaked bodily for a moment at the apparent risk.

"My stars! I'm afraid, but, well—yes," she came sturdily out with it. "Sure, it just has to be done. We got to face it now or never. Go on, Muriel. Go ahead, Court. You willing to plunge, Alice?"

"Decisively," Alice told her. "Imagine I've taken a few dares in my life as big as this."

Court promptly clapped the Prairie Rose Soap box on Hamilton's table.

"So here's where we begin," Court blurted, "with this Prairie Rose Soap box I'm tossing up here."

He put the Toe Cork Restaurant menu card on top.

Hamilton took it for one of Court's customary practical jokes, and smiled expectantly.

"That's a common sense way to begin, Court," he remarked. "A good many people commence the day's work with Prairie Rose. But what's the mystery about it?"

Before Court could start to explain, there was a knock on the private door.

Hamilton rang the bell for his tow-headed youthful draughtsman, Phil Catto, busy in the little filing room full of records just across the narrow hallway at the back of the office. Phil was filing clerk as well, and, with his skill at shorthand and typing, acted as the Chief's secretary when work piled up on the pair. Phil had a reputation for boyish resource, and he could labor outside just as efficiently as inside, rushing away on the grade to stick up a picket and get line along with the shiftiest of the surveyors when necessary.

"Look after that party, will you, Phil?" Hamilton requested, as the draughtsman hopped in, his red cheeks dimpling in a smile at them all, his smoke-gray eyes sparkling like topazes. "Unlock the door. Lou, here, juggled the catch. Tell them to wait a minute."

"O.K., Mr. Hamilton," Phil responded. "I'll see about that, you bet."

Phil took a batter's slide to the doorway, snapped back the lock slide and stuck his head out.

Immediately they recognized Tucker's voice, rigidly declaiming as if conducting a case in court.

They caught the words: "Previous appointment—very important—you tell Hamilton it can't wait."

Under Tucker's insistence, Phil Catto was not so sure about denying admission.

"It's Mr. Tucker, Mr. Hamilton," he called out. "Evidently it is his appointment time. Pressing business, Mr. Tucker says—can't be delayed."

"It can be delayed when I'm still busy," Hamilton returned. "Make Tucker wait."

Phil told him.

"Wait?" echoed Tucker. "Who? Me? Heavens above!"

Tucker's gasp of surprise, his snort of indignation, both were audible, also the voice of someone else rubbing it into the lawyer.

"Told you, Tucker, that nobody had a mortgage on the English language," Milt Slade chuckled in his reddening ears.

"Who's that outside talking to Tucker?" asked Hamilton of Phil.

"It's Constable Slade," announced Phil, enjoying Tucker's set-back. "He says he doesn't mind waiting at—"

"At all, at all," the Constable's voice came in, much louder. "No hurry for me, Phil. I can see Lockie when he's good and ready. If it's sundown, eh?"

Milt laughed good-naturedly and playfully rumbled Phil's tow-like hair.

Inside, Lou Gates growled a protest at Rupert Tucker's stubbornness.

"Yep, that's the Constable's business," Lou de-

clared, "waiting, shadowing, sneaking round, but, by crickeys, he's hired by law to do it. He has a license for that sort of recreation."

"And who hasn't, Lou?" snickered Hamilton.

Lou gave way to a sudden recklessness.

"Tucker hasn't," Lou burst out. "Look here, you folks, why don't you come to the point? The lid's off, ain't it?"

He made a swipe with his hand and rattled the lid of the Prairie Rose Soap box off onto the floor.

"Yes, the lid's off now, right enough," Court Baker admitted, "and they do say money talks."

Hamilton switched one astounded look at the neat packages of greenbacks side by side in the open soap box.

"Talks, you say?" he exploded. "It fairly shouts. They're fifty-dollar bills. How many, Court?"

"Couple of thousand of them," Court audited. "They add up to one hundred thousand dollars."

Hamilton gazed from face to face in the circle around him.

"Hmmm!" he murmured. "Is that a coincidence?"

"No, it's not," Court stated.

"Then it's just the sum the Overland Express is short of?" the Chief inquired.

"Yes," Court went on, "and your Great Falls and Canada denomination, bank, and everything, you see. American funds, you notice."

Hamilton nodded understandingly.

"In brief—?" he began.

"In brief, it's the Coyote Crossing hold-up payroll," Court summed up.

"And there's the Express delivery card that

brought it to me," volunteered Muriel.

She laid the card on top of the box.

"Great Brotherhood of Railwaymen!" exclaimed Hamilton. "Did you ever hear the like of that? Phil, come here, quick. Did you ever see the equal of that turn-up?"

"No, I never did," declared Phil, his mouth gaping, his eyes blazing, "and I've worked on funny things in funny places along the line for 'most ten years."

"Get your pad and pencil, Phil," Hamilton ordered crisply. "Make a note of this in shorthand. It will go straight into the company records. Want everything legal, you understand."

"Sure, I understand," cried Phil, grabbing for pad and pencil and putting it down *à la* Pitman's as directed.

Aunt Flo watched him, fascinated by the speed of his young fingers.

"Of course," she put in finally, "we guessed that Jack shipped it on the stage express. It must have been shipped immediately after the Overland was—was stopped."

"Exactly," murmured Hamilton, "I can imagine that was the how of it, and it's mighty fine of you ladies to return to the company the stol—I mean, the missing money without a minute's delay."

Muriel showed some spirit.

"It's not because we have no claim on it that we return it," she pointed out.

"By rights we have," her mother defined their position. "That amount belongs to us, and more besides, when you start to figure things in cold, hard cash."

"My land, yes, very much more," Aunt Flo argued. "They tell me the old T. N. T. ranch will bring a million dollars; subdivided."

"And I'll talk some rapid, hammer-fanning talk, Hamilton, and tell you that Muriel and her mother and Aunt Flo didn't return it because they couldn't use it," Court branched out with an eloquence that stunned even himself. "They could use it—losing homestead and open range, the court eating up compensation, and now Tucker sifting along today with the squatters' eviction proclamation that states the new Marlow cottage on River Street encroaches on the railroad switch reservation."

"But, Court, that can't be," cried Hamilton.

"Tucker holds it is," Court asserted.

"That's regrettable—unthinkable," the Chief sympathized warmly, "to have you ladies move *again*. You know, I asked for an experienced valuator to look after the reservation down there, and made mention of the Marlow deal—no mistakes to be made about it. I left it to Tucker as usual to look up the realtor, and one would expect that you could trust the man."

"Yeh!" Court sneered, "a man Tucker's dickered with a good bit—Lester Carr."

Hamilton brought his hand down with a friendly slap on Court's shoulder.

"Look, Court," he confided, "here we are face to face, talking man to man. Tell me honestly and aboveboard just what's the matter between you and Rupert Tucker over the Marlows. I've rather suspected for a while that there was something wrong some place, if I could only trace the spot."

"Well, suppose I'm riding herd on Muriel, here, along with her dad's cattle," Court introduced the sentimental possibility. "I ain't—really. And if I was, it wouldn't signify, 'cause there's lots of competition—the pick of the young fellows hereabouts milling after her at dances and barbecues and the fall round-ups, till here comes a handsome, dashing Mountie to beat them all to it, according to the circumstantial evidence—Milt, I mean—relative of your own, eh?"

"Sure," Hamilton acknowledged it, smiling knowingly, "sure, Milt is a relation of mine, more or less close, if you climb the family tree for a look."

"That's the layout," Court continued. "I'm riding herd. Milt's policing the T. N. T. Rupert Tucker horns in on the rodeo. When Tucker's bucked off his Romance slipping out of the chute—by the way, Lou, Rupert does call that slatey range pony of his Romance, doesn't he? Do you remember?"

"Course I recollect," growled Lou. "Romance is her maiden name, all right."

"Yeh," Court caught up on himself, "when Tucker's throwed by Romance before the whole crowd in the stands, he won't stay in the dust."

"Oh, I see," put in Hamilton. "That explains something, anyway."

"I figure Rupert thought the ranch deal and the cottage deal might give him another riding chance, a second entry, if you like to call it that," Court concluded.

"Not under the screen of my authority," Hamilton gave notice. "If Tucker rides that way, he rides alone, you understand."

Lou Gates leaned forward solemnly in his chair.

"Funny, Hamilton, but you sure ain't noticed the antics Tucker's cutting when you're out of the office," he commented. "But of course you've been tarnation busy all the time."

"Busy," breathed Hamilton. "That's the term that covers it. Busy with the new branch lines, the big booms, fresh townsites, the whole western development that's founded on surveys—"

"Yeh, for certain," Court hastened to excuse him from any lack of foresight.

"Indeed, it's too much all at once," observed Alice Marlow. "You've had your hands more than full with everything."

"All the same," confessed Hamilton, drumming with his fingers on the table, "I did come across odd-numbered lots that were really even and could not possibly be included in the lands granted by the government or in what was legally expropriated for switches or little spur extensions. You see, we made many surveys and ran lines galore for miles across open country, and at the final choice there would certainly be opportunity for juggling of numbered lots or engineering other irregularities if—well, if Tucker were so disposed. If he were—"

Hamilton paused, and they all looked round at the closed door, realizing this was in strict confidence. Phil Catto, finished with his financial recording, tapped his closed pad softly with his pencil and awaited the Chief's next order.

"Things out of place did pop up," he admitted after a minute, "but before I could investigate thoroughly, something urgent piled in on top and I had no chance to thumb the records back as far as I



should have liked. However, now we'll have a complete check-up—right back to the beginning and the first preliminary surveys across the Three Northwest Torches Ranch and also the old Marlow-Montana Ranch—since they abut, as you know, at the border.

Muriel Marlow gave an exclamation of genuine delight at the idea.

"That's wonderful news, Mr. Hamilton," she smiled. "The best I've heard for a long while."

Her mother patted her hand lovingly.

"Yes, Muriel, just imagine," she murmured, "if there should be such a thing as an upset that would bring the old M and M back to us."

Aunt Flo puffed judicially, her head close to theirs in speculation.

"Stranger things have happened," Flo vowed hopefully. "You never know when the Western winds are going to kick up a dust and uncover something in the buried past. And I'd just like to see Rupert Tucker well pasted by a good big whirlwind."

"Cyclone," Court amended. "One of those goose-greased, funnel-shaped twisters that would pick him up and plunk him down in his last Court-of-Law."

Hamilton had turned to Phil Catto.

"Put that pad and pencil in your breast pocket, Phil," he directed, "and tell Mr. Tucker to come right in—his appointment is due, after all. Ask Constable Milt Slade to step in with Tucker."

"Yes, Mr. Hamilton, yes, of course," Phil chirped as he jumped to obey. "I'll have them right in."

"Don't hold them here, Phil," Hamilton added. "Just follow us along across the hall into your

draughting room yonder where all our records are."

"Sure, Mr. Hamilton, square across—on the jump," Phil cheerfully accepted his instruction.

"We'll all go ahead," Hamilton invited the ladies, Court and Lou, as he led the way, "and we'll be very careful not to leave the Prairie Rose behind."

He put the lid back on the boxful of money and stuck it under his arm.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

ACROSS the narrow office hallway and into the draughtsman's room, with its plan books, blueprints, maps and files tiered on shelves all around the four walls, they trooped, and Hamilton deposited the Prairie Rose Soap box on Phil's drawing board where it was in plain view while he peered along the shelf edges at the alphabetical letters in combinations that told him where any survey wanted could be got track of in the cardboard filing cabinets or in the bristol board plan binders with their metal clasps stuck on like clothespins.

Muriel Marlow, keeping anxiously at his elbow, gazed in wonder at the array.

"Are all your survey records here, Mr. Hamilton?" she asked, surprised.

"They should be, for this section," he told her. "If the ones we want aren't here, they'll be down at Sweet Grass where we worked on the boundary plans. Maybe they are, too. I don't seem to see the Great Falls and Canada Line terminal, there, and the Marlow-Montana Ranch it meandered over at the border."

Lou Gates spoke sarcastically at his shoulder.

"Mebbe Rupert Tucker can tell you where it is," suggested Lou. "Here he is now, with Constable Milt Slade."

"Oh, there you are, Milt," grinned Hamilton. "How do you do, my godchild?"

"How are you, Lockie?" smiled Milt. "My uncle—I'm taking a chance on that term."

"A Mounted man is always taking chances," laughed his relation. "Now Court and Lou, here, were just talking about a rodeo they called Romance."

"Afraid I wouldn't be rider enough for that kind of competition," Milt belittled himself, but at the same time letting his eyes and his smile rest on Muriel. "Got pitched last night, you know, Lockie."

"Modest nephew—and that's a shot in the dark, too, Milt," bantered Hamilton. "I notice you have Tucker along. You're just the man I wanted to see, Rupert. Those Sweet Grass surveys, the G. F. & C. and M & M, that should have been with the T. N. T. blueprints on this shelf of Phil Catto's—I can't lay my hand on them. Do you suppose they're about at all?"

Tucker coughed apologetically.

"I'm kind of certain, yes, I'm rather of the idea that they're not, Lauchlan," he confessed.

The Chief Lands Surveyor stared at him sharply, and there was a moment's significant silence all round the group.

"You know they're not?" he asked Tucker, straight.

"Well, yes, I think—yes, I'm sure they're at Sweet Grass."

"You left them down yonder at our Sweet Grass survey camp on the border?" Hamilton kept at him.

"Somehow, I believe, as partly they concerned that immediate section," Tucker admitted. "Yes, I remember now that they're at the Sweet Grass survey camp, all right. It didn't seem to me to matter a great deal, since we're back and forward there."

"The handier place for them was here," Hamilton

contended severely. "I might say the proper place, because we need them for inspection now. By tonight, at least, we'll give them a lookover. I feel there has been some mistake about the Marlow property on River Street, and possibly a mix-up in lot numbers of the Marlow homestead on the T. N. T. The error might even extend to Montana, you understand. Tucker, to the Marlow-Montana former open range that the Gros Ventres and Crow Indians regard as their private hunting ground off the reserves."

Tucker shivered.

"I wouldn't want to try to take the old Marlow-Montana Ranch back from the Crows and the Gros Ventres," he observed with apprehension. "They've pitched their tepee villages and camped and fished and hunted—yes, and warred and raided over the boundary for a long time. Most ten years that Gros Ventre horsethief Silver Blade's band and the band of that Crow renegade, Short Leg, have raised stolen bronchos and stolen steers in those Sweet Grass Hills and Bear's Paw Mountains."

"Nevertheless, if the maps show the old M & M has been blanketed, we'll take it back," declared Hamilton, "and Constable Milt Slade N. W. M. P. and U. S. Sheriff Fred Provost will be on hand to see that it's a good border job."

Tucker studied the Marlows with some hesitation for a minute, rotating from one antagonistic face to another in seeking a friendly opening.

"If there's been any error on River Street, it's to my great regret," he asserted almost penitently. "Certainly I didn't willingly put the cottage on my squatters' list."

His penitence, patently genuine, was too much for Court Baker.

"It's to your all-fired satisfaction you mean, Tucker," Court burst out.

Tucker turned on him irascibly.

"There you go again, Court—butting in where you're not invited," he flashed.

"You need some one to butt into you, Rupert, or I sure don't know where you'd stop," growled Court belligerently as he shifted a foot towards him.

"I'll see if you—" began Tucker, but the Chief Lands Surveyor interrupted.

The Chief diplomatically stepped between them.

"Hold on, you two," Hamilton advised. "No light-heavyweight bouts or catch-as-catch-can wrestling matches in here. Too many plans to be wrecked. I'll handle this situation. Phil and I were riding over to Sweet Grass anyway tonight, to check some plans, and Tucker, I think, is due there also about terminal blueprints or something else. Eh, Rupert?"

"Yes, I'm riding that way," Tucker announced.

"I wanted to attend to the Sweet Grass business this evening and to get back, because that squatters' list has to be disposed of in the morning. The switch builders are coming tomorrow, you see."

Hamilton beamed his satisfaction.

"Good enough!" he cried. "We'll verify—or maybe reverse—the Marlow titles. The ladies can view the maps and plans in question themselves. Muriel and her mother can ride with us. Since Aunt Flo won't care to sit a horse in the general excitement, she had better ride the stage with Lou in his Sweet Grass run

—we'll all be right alongside, family party, like. Suit you, Lou?"

"Sure, most excellent," chuckled Lou. "I'll be pulling out on schedule, as usual, from the Toe Cork Livery, where I change relays."

Muriel was all built up on the chance of reversing the surveys, and she could not repress her eagerness and delight.

"Oh! thank you; indeed, Mr. Hamilton," she exclaimed in gratitude. "I can hardly wait till I get there. But, mother's liable to excite herself again, or overexert in the saddle. Maybe she had better stage it with Aunt Flo."

"No, I'm riding with you, Muriel," her mother objected instantly. "I can hardly wait, either. It won't be too much for me. You needn't be a bit afraid of that, my dear."

Tucker seemed actually pleased at her decision, at her improved condition. No doubt her sudden collapse at the T. N. T. had worried him a good deal more than the others had imagined at first.

"That's fine, if you and Muriel are riding, Mrs. Marlow," he remarked. "We'll all be on the Sweet Grass Trail together."

Court Baker regarded him suspiciously.

"Don't bank on riding two abreast, Rupert," he cautioned him. "It ain't so healthy in Gros Ventre and Crow country. Besides, there's lots of hombres who might prefer your place."

"What do you mean—lots?" demanded Tucker. "Isn't this a family party, as Lauchlan said?"

"Maybe family," prophesied Court vaguely, "but if I don't make a miscount, it'll be a whopping big

reunion, with a heck of a lot of people having business down at Sweet Grass tonight."

Aunt Flo nodded confidently in support of the T. N. T. foreman.

"If the news gets round, there'll be a lot of our neighbors anxious to hear the outcome and riding that way to find out," she commented.

Muriel asserted her independence concerning any courtesies Tucker might have in mind.

"So don't expect any special companionship on our jaunt, Rupert," she observed distantly. "I imagine mother and I can look after ourselves well enough—or be looked after."

"Well, I'll be jogging somewhere close by," Rupert contented himself with the pittance. "Maybe I can tighten your cinch or adjust a stirrup or something else if anything slips."

"Thanks, Rupert," she smilingly kept him in doubt, "but Mr. Hamilton or Phil Catto or Constable Milt Slade could probably attend to that."

"Yes, Tucker, you attend to the Sweet Grass records, to their verification or their reversing," Hamilton cut in. "That's your duty. And here's Constable Slade's duty—right here, Milt."

The Chief Lands Surveyor tipped the lid of the Prairie Rose Soap box on Phil Catto's drawing board, exposing the packages of bills.

"My duty—how do you mean, Lockie?" inquired Milt while the Chief was in the act.

Lou Gates laughed.

"Box is full of soapy, slippery greenbacks, Milt," Lou pointed out. "The new branch line's paying dividends already, you savvy."



Tucker stared unbelievably at first.

"Money," he blurted. "Let's see. My great ghosts, look at the amount, will you?"

The Constable, too, was flatly astonished.

"Some payroll, that, Lockie," he breathed, attempting a rough mental estimate of the sum lying there so snugly in the space of ten cakes of soap. "Know the total? Where'd it come from?"

"It's the Coyote Crossing payroll, Milt," enlightened Hamilton. "One hundred thousand dollars. Returned by stage express, care of Miss Muriel Marlow."

"Jack sent it?" demanded Tucker, seemingly floored by the revelation.

"Yeh," Court Baker shot at him, "if nobody else had it to send."

"Thunderation!" exploded the Constable softly. "This is one thing I've found right off the bat, then. Now, if I can find Jack just as easy—"

"Maybe you can, Milt," Hamilton encouraged his strapping young relative. "This is a cinch for you. My secretary has all the details of the shipment down in shorthand—Phil, here, inscribed every word about the finding of the money in place of the soap. A valuable witness, eh, Phil?"

"Sure, absolutely orthodox, everything," agreed Phil. "I have it, every scrap. I can witness, make affidavit, take any necessary oath."

"Then read it off your pad, Phil, and Milt will write it in his own records and take charge of the missing payroll," directed Hamilton. "You can check it through your Mounted Police headquarters, Milt, and turn it in to our railway company cashier."

While the secretary and the Constable were scribbling the entries, Court Baker and Lou Gates were laughing hugely together and clapping each other soundly on the back in their exuberance.

"I'm betting the Constable expected to arrest you or me, Court, for possession of that goshdanged vanishing payroll," Lou twitted Milt behind his busy back.

The Mounted man wheeled about, as he finished recording and hooked the money-filled Prairie Rose Soap box to his belt, with a strange, meaningful smile on his satisfied face.

"Maybe I'll arrest one of you two jokers—or maybe both you clowns—for something else yet," Milt threw out the threat.

Hamilton laughed with Court and Lou.

"Well, that's that," Hamilton closed the matter, "and I'll have to push on with the rest of the routine and get things cleaned up for the night so as to break away for Sweet Grass. I've just one more word to say, and it's to Muriel herself. Muriel, you go along by the Toe Cork Lunchroom and tell them you've got your job there back again. I'll fix it with the executive board and the station management to reinstate you. See?"

"Gracious sakes alive," crowed Aunt Flo, "that's telling them where they're at."

"It's awfully nice of you, Mr. Hamilton," Alice Marlow thanked him warmly. "To go out of your way and to take that trouble."

"Not any trouble at all," Hamilton disclaimed. "It's only Muriel's due."

"But it's wonderfully considerate of you, Mr. Ham-

ilton," Muriel added her appreciation. "Thanks, ever so much."

"Maybe you won't be in the Toe Cork Lunch long, Muriel," he enlarged his further plans. "Filing work is piling up on Phil and myself here, and we figure that very soon we'll have to take on an assistant secretary for the surveys."

"Oh! I should love that," cried Muriel. "Filing plans and things would suit me fine."

"All right Muriel. Remember you're first in line for the position. And listen—"

The Chief pinched her pretty ear and whispered in it.

"I'm going to see if I can't do something about your father, Muriel—the six months, I mean."

Muriel's eyes moistened abruptly and her voice trembled oddly.

"That would be a miracle," she whispered back.

"It's a judicial matter, but I'll make Government representations," he confided. "They know there were pretty aggravating circumstances. So cheer up and keep hoping hard—till we hear something from Ottawa. See you all this evening. So long till then, everybody."

"Yes, this evening," echoed Tucker. "I'm off now, too. See you tonight, Muriel."

Muriel replied stiffly.

"Only on that point of business," she stipulated.

A general chuckle went round the room, Court Baker's the deepest of all.

"So you're going to make a Toe Cork Lunchroom call, Muriel," Court rejoiced. "I don't mind. I'm getting plenty hungry. No place I'd sooner stroll into

this famished minute."

"Same here," smiled Constable Slade. "I'm going down to the lunchroom kitchen myself to have a look at the white uniform of that waiter who spilled the hot coffee on my hands."

Muriel and Court stared at him sharply but gave no sign.

"Remember?" mused Milt, as if the incident had happened a long time ago. "When my pr—I mean, your dad—managed to esc—that is, when dad and I parted company at the station?"

Court and Muriel nodded slowly.

"I'd like you to look with me, Muriel," Milt continued, quite matter-of-fact, "to make certain for me that it's the same uniform—to sort of identify it, like. Maybe your mother and aunt would like to sample some of Peter the Greek's dishes there, too. And Lou—he's just as hungry as Court. So come on, everybody, to the Toe Cork Lunchroom."

Alice Marlow and Aunt Flo felt, rather than heard, something ominous in the Constable's words, but like Muriel and Court, they gave no sign and did not flinch a shade.

"That would be a good idea, Flo," agreed Alice, rising instantly.

"Sure," seconded Lou Gates. "Peter the Greek's old familiar grub won't hurt nary a one of us."

The mere mention of Peter's meals brought back the savory fragrance of his cooking on round-up and barbecue, conjured up for them, even in the semi-enclosure of the new, booming town, the spacious ranch scenes of the T. N. T. with its everlasting acres, the Old Man River rolling on and never getting

there, the distant Porcupine Hills, the more distant Livingstone Range, and the barrier Rockies, snow-capped, ice-peaked, walling it all.

Somehow, knowingly or unknowingly, Milt Slade had been part of that scene ever since the day they came north of the border.

Now, knowingly or unknowingly, they had the strange feeling as they followed behind him that the broad-backed young Mounted man held their destiny in his hands.

Muriel felt it most of all and secretly studied Milt's face in his stride, a tinge of color rising to her own cheeks as she asked herself what he was up to now.

## CHAPTER XXX.

IN THE Toe Cork Lunch kitchen, Peter the Greek was busily handling his soups, meats, potato and vegetable dishes, his salads and mixed fruits, the tasty sandwiches he could cut so cunningly thin and roll into cylinders, wonderful pies and cakes of his own oven magic, the far-famed ranch coffee he brewed, a coffee that diffused its aroma down the good, stiff prairie winds to visitors at immense distances—almost as far, in fact, as the always burning trio of campfires talked to them in the torch language of neighborliness, welcome and trust.

Being somewhat short-handed now, in Muriel's absence, Peter worked at top speed on rush orders that were coming in thick and fast from a hungry restaurant crowd in the other end, but he was happiest when cooking rapidly and his snappy, sunny spirit timed his darting movements in and out again from the lunch counter and the lunch tables with one of his familiar Grand Opera arias.

There came also, as a sort of orchestral accompaniment for Peter's aria, the kitchen hum to Constable Slade and to those following him when they reached the kitchen entrance at the back and passed in—the swishing of pivoting doors, the rattle of plates, the gushing of coffee taps, the horn-like echoes of orders called out, the impatient drumming of fingers on the lunch counter, the cymbal-toned clang of the communication bell.

The Constable glimpsed the ghostly flitting of Peter's white uniform as he poked his head in and

followed his Stetson with the scarlet blaze of the tunic across his own wide shoulders.

"Hello, Peter," he sang out.

The squelching hiss of the whizzing doors answered the Mounted man.

The gay ghost of Peter was out of sight in the luncheon quarters.

Lou Gates snickered slyly.

"No definite reply, Milt," Lou remarked in comedy. "Peter's been and gone while you drew your breath. By jiminy crickets, here he comes again. Sure makes the starched uniform flutter when he gets a move on, eh?"

Peter was back through the threshing doors, his tray high, his aria higher still, hitting the ceiling and spreading out through the side wall ventilators as if far into the wings.

"Hello, there, Peter," Milt caught him on the fly, grinning in appreciation of his vocal as well as his culinary skill.

Around the end of his laden tray, Peter, squinting shrewdly, swiftly recognized the wearer of the scarlet, his wary black eyes running as rapidly at the same time over Mrs. Marlow, Aunt Flo, Muriel, Court and Lou behind the Constable.

Instantly Peter sized up the situation as one involving something of investigation and intuitively he placed his reliance in the urgency of his occupation to speed it through before the probe could go too deep.

"Hello, yourself, Milt," he returned good-humoredly. "Come back to finish that meal you missed? O.K., go on in with the women folks and eat. Go on

in, Mrs. Marlow, Aunt Flo, Muriel. There's plenty of room. I'll fix you up in a minute. So don't hold up the service by talking, Milt. Don't you see I'm fair rushed off my feet?"

Alice Marlow and Aunt Flo slipped through the swing doors, but Muriel paused a moment, waiting, while the Constable literally buttonholed Peter in his flight.

"Sure, Peter, sure," procrastinated Milt, "there's nobody in this party going to back up from your baking. I'm just as full of hungry smells myself as either Court or Lou. But slow down a second."

"What for?" objected Peter, still pulling.

"I'm looking for a uniform," explained Milt, fingering the white coat, "and this seems to be it. You've doused it in the laundry; evidently, Peter—cleaning coffee stains off."

"What do I care?" droned Peter, whistling unconcernedly. "That's what the Toe Cork laundry is in here for. Wash my own shirts, too, when I want."

"Don't doubt it, Peter," the Mounted man laughed. "Only, the coffee stains look to be mixed with a certain kind of soap that makes them hard to get off completely. Smell?"

Peter the Greek sniffed.

"What kind of soap?" he asked blankly.

"Prairie Rose Soap," Milt told him.

Peter chuckled, deep down in his chest, a Grand Opera wheeze.

"Oh! Ah-hah! That olive oil stuff, Milt. That oil from my own old land. Wish I was there, right now. You smell brings it back—the Isles of Greece. You know that fellow Byron?"



The Constable nodded lightly, reading the warm Aegean gleam that flashed through the fleeting expression of yearning shining momentarily in Peter's eyes.

"The reward for that Overland hold-up artist would take you there, Peter, and keep you there for the rest of your natural life—that is, if you happened to know which way the rider on the buckskin pony headed."

Peter shot a glance at Muriel who said nothing.

Peter himself said nothing—not till the Constable turned him round in his progressive inspection of the guilty uniform. Then the Greek whispered to Muriel in a rehearsal-like, softened hum—a sort of try-out before blaring on-stage.

"Milt's not tempting me, Muriel—even if I did know."

"Don't you, Peter?" she murmured in a tone that was almost inaudible.

"Great gods on Olympus," Peter breathed, "we all have a pretty good idea."

"Mr. Hamilton has given me my Toe Cork job back again, Peter."

"Good!" puffed Peter. "Great! Plumb scrumptious. I'll sure spread the news to the kitchen staff and they'll jump for joy—They like you, Muriel. They all fall in love with you—including Tucker, Court, Lou, Milt, and maybe—"

"Peter," cooed Muriel amusedly, "you're not making love to me yourself?"

"No—Ah-hah! Me, no," Peter shied off. "Not a worn-out Metropolitan star like me. In the young days when I sang at Athens and over in Milan I might have been your Romeo. But your job—Hamilton is

a fine fellow. Might make the colonization cranks give you a lot of things back yet."

"He's trying it, Peter. We're going to Sweet Grass tonight to look at his original maps. So keep hoping while you cook."

"I'll do that, Muriel," vowed Peter.

The Constable was poking Peter in the back with an impatient forefinger.

"Another waiter maybe mistook your coat, Peter, and slipped it on for his own yesterday," Milt suggested as the only apparent solution.

"My ghost, then," grinned Peter. "No other waiter on duty. Look at the railway time-clock, not punched. Look at my staff-card, no extra help marked. Look at my pay-check book stubs; no pay-check for nobody clumsy enough to spill hot coffee. Don't hire that kind."

"I don't need to look," asserted the Mounted man, who knew very well that all the records were against his proving anything.

"What you bother me for when you know all that, Milt?" Peter demanded.

Milt held out his hand, closed.

"Just to feel in the pockets of your nice, clean, freshly laundered coat, Peter. Guess what you forgot to take out?"

"My tooth brush," guessed Peter promptly.

They all burst into merriment, Lou Gates laughing his sombrero off.

"Maybe it was one of them Grand Opera notes you keep under your chest, Peter," hazarded Lou.

"Might be you dropped one."

"I sing true," Peter spiritedly defended his artistic

talent. "No bum note on me."

Again the laugh went round.

"Still you're not so far out, Lou," the Constable joked. "It has something to do with music, for it happens to be the key."

Aunt Flo and Mrs. Marlow came back and looked through the dividing doors for the others, just in time to hear Milt's remark.

"What's that?" asked Aunt Flo. "What key are you talking about?"

"The key of my handcuffs. Naturally there are finger smears on them."

"Whose finger tracks?" questioned Muriel swiftly.

"Not your dad's, Muriel," Milt dispelled her evident alarm at the possible connection.

"Man's or woman's fingerprints?" Alice Marlow shrewdly interrogated.

"Man's," conceded the Constable laconically.

"Must have been Peter's ghost, as he said."

"Ghost picked it up, put it in his ghostly pocket and then forgot about it, eh?" ventured Court.

"Yes, Court," Milt fell in with the supposition, "I expect so. That's why I'm inviting you and Lou—and the ladies, too, of course—to pass by the Barracks with me on the way out of town to the T. N. T. Ranch. Just a look in there at headquarters."

"What in tarnation you want, Milt?" demanded Lou petulantly. "You trying to finger track us?"

"When your hands are clean and your conscience clear, you won't mind obliging the red tape," he wheedled Court and Lou. "Quite a bunch of T. N. T. hands at the station, you remember. Wish to eliminate you two first. Routine investigation."

"And if we conclude it's not so convenient to go along by the Barracks?" temporized Court, who had no love of hanging round Mounted Headquarters.

"In that case," sighed Milt, "I'd only have to arrest you fellows and haul you up there, suspicion of interfering with my pris— my companion, in transit, and conspiring for escape. That is, on general principles, you savvy."

"By all the gum-shoed ginks of detectives, I've a good mind not to drive by your N. W. M. P. post at all," flared Lou. "Feel like letting you fire ahead and do your darnedest. Nobody ever ordered schedule on my stage route yet but me."

"Steady on the grades, Lou," cautioned Court with diplomacy. "Won't hurt us any to ride by."

"All right, Court," Lou saw fit to capitulate all at once, "you're the wizard wise-man."

"That sounds better," Milt smiled. "So you may as well know beforehand that there was something in the other pocket of Peter's coat."

Peter stopped erratically the song he had begun to hum again.

"What?" he chattered. "My gold ring? I lost it in the kitchen some place."

"You'll find it in the Three Torches Town pawnshop, Peter," laughed Lou.

"No, it's something slipperier than a pawnbroker," enlightened the Constable, "a cake of Prairie Rose Soap instead."

"What in heck has a cake of soap got to do with a handcuff key?" propounded Lou Gates.

"The same soapy smears on both," Milt answered. "Now we'll all have a try at your cooking, Peter."

The customers inside were hungry also. Their voices rose with their demands.

"Coffee, here, Peter."

"Sandwiches—what's keeping them away?"

"Get a move on, Peter—our train's due, you know."

"What about some fresh fruit, Peter?"

Peter inflated his lungs.

"Coming," he bawled, "on the hop."

Muriel managed to put an anxious question as they pushed in to the tables.

"Who did pick up that key in the restaurant, Court?" she asked. "You remember doing it?"

"No, I don't, Muriel. You wouldn't remember picking it up yourself, would you?"

"No, I can't remember doing anything like that, either, Court."

Peter followed them in closely, his tray already heavily reladen, his arias going strong once more.

He soared in *Lucia di Lammermoor* as if he had never skipped notes for any interview with the Mounted in the kitchen.

Also, he nudged Court Baker's elbow in serving all the party.

"Staff Wylie was in and ate," he informed Court.

"Staff say anything while he ate?" inquired Court quietly.

"Yes, he did."

"What did Staff say?"

"Said everything was ready if you're moving the T. N. T. longhorn herd tonight."

"Maybe I am, Peter," Court nodded. "You be ready to step out of that white coat and jump into your chaps once I get past Milt's barracks."

"Gracious!" Aunt Flo broke in, under-toned, fussing nervously with soup spoon, knife and fork. "Question is—will you get past, if either you or Muriel did actually pick up yon key? They'd catch you sure with soap marks."

"Haven't caught anybody yet with Prairie Rose," scoffed Court, although he was quaking inwardly himself at the risk.

"Nope," Lou Gates agreed, "for it covers a mighty wide area. I've toted it over the whole darn Northwest. Let's eat."

## CHAPTER XXXI.

SINKING fires of sunset behind the mountain barrier of the Rockies were blazing through the Kootenay Passes, pooling the plains with gold in tawny contrast to the silvery snaking river courses, fringed with white cottonwood and red dog willow, as the Constable's friends finished their meal in the Toe Cork Lunch and rode with him out of Three Torches town toward Macleod and the Mounted Police Barracks straight ahead of them.

Between the last litter of the straggling, newly carpentered town limits and the aged blur of the lower mountain spurs in the middle distance, Milt saw the whole foothill country in vast inky silhouette, from the ringing N. W. M. P. posts Beaver Creek, Pincher Creek, Fort Kipp, Fort Whoop Up, Fort Stand Off, right down to Fort Macleod at The Slough, from the Blood Indians' Belly River Reserve and the Peigan Indians' Old Man River Reserve clear through the Three Northwest Torches Ranch near at hand.

Like ebony carvings, whiskered with white where the freshly limed cowcatchers guarded the intruding rails of the Edmonton, Calgary and Macleod Branch, the ranch buildings huddled—the Marlow homestead, the T. N. T. hands' bunkhouse and other structures, the horse corral, the branding corral.

Like mahogany mannikins, red-lighted on heads and shoulders against the cardinal blaze, the human figures posed on the skyline all round the phosphorescent-eyed, burnished-horned herd massed in the valley below where the one lone campfire burned.

So long had he ridden their ranges, so often had they signed his patrol slips on their patrols, that the Mounted man recognized each figure by its sit in the saddle or attitude upon the vehicle-seat, whether chuck wagon, prairie schooner or buckboard, wherever they had come in and taken up position in readiness to help with the transfer of the cattle.

Milt saw Al Macdonald with his buckboard, driven from the Glengarry Ranch.

He spotted Charlie Sharples of the Winder Ranch, Joe Macfarland of the Pioneer, Bright of Bright's Ranch, La Grandeur from his Old Man River range, North Fork Thibandau from his Kootenay River holding.

Easy to pick out, too, North Axe, the Peigan chief, poised among his young men, Burnt Hill, Whistling Bird, Flying Cloud and more, and, farther away, shone the feathered headdress of Red Crow, chief of the Bloods, with his retinue led by Dark Sun, Storm Feather, Quick Foot.

Riding herd, either in groups, or singly like the familiar shadowy outline of the cowboy Tex and the unmistakable Staff Wylie on his gray pony, Badger, the T. N. T. men passed and repassed.

Excluding the foreman, Court Baker, loping close behind, with Muriel and her mother on one side and Aunt Flo in Lou's stage on the other, every man was accounted for, except Jack Marlow.

And it was up to him to produce Jack Marlow, produce him quickly before that mass of longhorns restlessly milling in the valley took it into their heads to charge south for the border through the St. Mary's River customs post—or its handiest vicinity—far faster



than he and the T. N. T. hands could count.

Court Baker, too, sensed the restlessness of the herd shifting so erratically.

"What makes those steers uneasy?" Court demanded. "It isn't the wind and it isn't the weather."

"Mebbe it's Injun smells," hazarded Lou Gates across his front wheel.

"They've smelled Peigans before now," Aunt Flo observed sagely.

"And Bloods also," Alice Marlow commented.

"These Indians may be strange," agreed Muriel, "but not so strange as to start them running here and there on familiar open range."

"They don't sniff the old Montana-Marlow Ranch?" suggested the Constable, nodding to the south. "A far-off sniff?"

"Hardly," decided Court. "Though possible, at that. There really are old cows in the bunch that must remember the M & M home range. Some patriarchal steers, too, I guess. Besides fresh stock Jack bought down thataway now and again. Danged ornery stock that would as soon as not go home again if somebody shows them the quickest trail."

"Could they smell Gros Ventre and Crow Indians on the border yonder?" Milt inquired.

They all looked at him in the horizontal rays of the sun-spray from the peaks, swaying pensively in his saddle, his thoughtful face turned towards the U. S.-Canada boundary, and again they caught that vague hint of deep significance in his most careless words—and acts.

"Could if the wind was right," Court admitted. "If they were there to smell. Anybody say to you that

the Crows and Gros Ventres were there?"

"Not yet," Milt told him, "but we'll soon find out. Here are the Barracks."

It was hot in the orderly room, so Commandant Steele and U. S. Sheriff Fred Provost had come out into the evening air and were sitting on the steps talking to Sergeant Joyce, N. C. O. Roberts and several Constables in off patrol with their various reports.

"Hello, Milt," Steele nodded, as if nothing very extraordinary had happened since he set out for Winnipeg with Jack Marlow. "Back again, eh? How are you, Mrs. Marlow, Muriel, Aunt Flo? How do, Court and Lou?"

One official eye on Milt, the Commandant's other eye continued to twinkle at the Marlows while he went on talking to them in genial, offhand fashion, so that everything seemed like a friendly call in riding by and not a specific visit to Mounted Police headquarters.

"You may go right ahead, where you are, Milt," he invited. "Never mind the orderly room just now. Your old friend Fred Provost thinks it's cooler here. As U. S. Sheriff, he has just presented his credentials and informed me that the Crows and Gros Ventres were sneaking up to the border when he rode over the Sweet Grass Trail."

Constable Slade eyed the Sweet Grass Sheriff a little resentfully.

"You didn't mention the Crows and the Gros Ventres to me, Fred," he accused.

"Thought you had troubles enough, Milt," Fred

grinned. "Those could come later. Silver Blade and Short Leg."

"Well, if they're there, they're there," Milt accepted their presence resignedly.

He saluted Commandant Steele smartly.

"I present my report, sir."

"Very good, Constable Slade," smiled Steele.

Milt unhooked the Prairie Rose Soap box full of money from his belt and laid it on the step beside Sam Steele.

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"The recovered Overland Express cash, one hundred thousand dollars," he announced simply, "with details in a shorthand account by Phil Catto."

Steele stared.

"Well—Ah!" he blurted. "Lightning work, isn't it, Constable Slade?"

Milt put his fragrant Prairie Rose cake on top of the box.

"The piece of soap that Sergeant Joyce asked for, sir."

Sergeant Joyce jumped up in his surprise, eyeing the smears upon the soap cake.

"There was no sense lugging all those T. N. T. riders up here to inspect their fingers," Milt declared.

"But for the sake of appearances I have a couple present, Court and Lou. Only, it's no use fussing with dusting powder to make them sneeze, Sergeant Joyce."

"Why?" asked the Sergeant.

"Take a look at Court's and Lou's hands. You can see they're beyond all comparison."

Sergeant Joyce nodded, satisfied that neither Court's long, "mobile fingers nor Lou's longer cal-

loused, rein-clutching claws had made the short, broad, fat impressions on the soap cake.

"Whose are they?" the Sergeant wanted to know.

"Peter the Greek's. Washed his coat, his shirt, his whole spick-and-span Toe Cork Restaurant, including my handcuff key on the floor. To save his hungry customers missing him again, I just rubbed some soap froth on the rim of my soup dish before he handed it to me down there a little while ago. Here's the dish."

Milt took from under his tunic the imprinted dish he had stowed away so thoughtfully.

"The very same," he indicated.

"Yes, exactly," admitted Sergeant Joyce.

"I know that thumb myself," chuckled Steele.

"Peter stuck it in my soup more than once. Remember those round-up meals and barbecues, Mrs. Marlow?"

Alice's eyes lightened with a smile.

"Those are happy memories," she breathed in a tone full of wistfulness.

"Maybe they'll come again," hazarded the Commandant. "Peter counts himself out and ends the trail of the Prairie Rose with his frenzy for sanitation, but Milt seems to be a wonder at producing things. Now, Milt, that you've done it three times, hand-running, perhaps you can make it four and produce Jack Mar—that is, rather, induce Mrs. Marlow's husband to give us an interview."

"No doubt I can," stated Milt promptly.

The Commandant and the Sergeant both stared at him.

N. C. O. Roberts and the other Constables joined

in the fixed gaze.

"You mean you know where Jack Marlow is, Milt?" interrogated Steele sharply.

"Only a few places Jack could be right now," enumerated Milt. "He didn't like the accommodation on the Winnipeg train. He didn't pass Fort Kipp, Fort Stand Off, Fort Whoop Up, Fort Macleod, Pincher Creek, Beaver Creek or any of our Mounted posts all round the district. And Fred Provost says he didn't travel over the border by the Sweet Grass Trail."

"No, he didn't," corroborated the Sweet Grass Sheriff swiftly.

"Well, then, Milt?" Steele prompted.

"Only a few less places," Milt cut it down.

"Could you name those places?" the Commandant suggested methodically.

"The ranches," Milt went over them, "the Gleggarry, the Pioneer, the Winder, Bright's, La Grandeur's, the North Fork Kootenay of Thibandau's and maybe one or two more. Or else the two handy Indian Reserves of North Axe and Red Crow."

"Do you want search warrants for those ranches?" Sam Steele inquired.

Milt shook his head disdainfully.

"I don't need to search," he asserted. "All I have to do is ask the owners. They're out yonder on the T. N. T. I've always found them men of their word. North Axe and Red Crow, too."

"Go on and ask," the Commandant consented. "Is there anything else you want? Men, for instance?"

"I'll need three men, with their tents and tarpaulins, to station by the three torches on the Mar-

low ranch," Milt requested.

Steele nodded to the three Constables talking with the N. C. O. Roberts, and Sackett, Barr and Oliver got up to go.

"Tents and tarpaulins, you want, Milt?" quizzed the Commandant with a lift of the eyebrows. "Saddle and blanket, that's all you've been using yourself for quite a while. Do you think the Mounted boys are getting a bit soft?"

"The tents and the tarpaulins are to spread by those torches, to enclose them, like," Milt explained, using his hands in pantomime.

"Afraid of the coals spreading—firing the prairie grass?" figured his superior.

"No, I just want to stop those coals talking," Milt confessed.

He gave Muriel an odd, speculative glance as he beckoned the other three Constables after him.

"You see, Muriel," he told her, "I learned the three torches language quite some time ago."

## CHAPTER XXXII.

CONSTABLES Sackett, Barr, and Oliver pitched their tents and staked their tarpaulins, screen-fashion, where Milt showed them, Sackett in the branding corral, Barr out on the home range where the T. N. T. chuck wagon still stood, Oliver on the bed ground by the only live fire on the river flat.

He was so particular about the exact locations, even of the two extinct fires, that the three Constables wondered, and Sackett kicked his ash heap in the big corral with a contemplative toe.

"You think there might be a red ember or two left yet, Slade?" he asked.

"Banked coals last forever if you keep them banked and replenish the coals now and then, Sackett," Milt reminded him. "They flare when needed. If they flare, keep them cupped with your canvas. Don't let anybody read the blaze. No fire code. Sayvy?"

"I savvy, all right," observed Constable Barr, raking Peter the Greek's ancient cooking place on the home range and finding a nest of tiny sparks. "Quit worrying, Slade. I'll keep this spot shaded."

"You bet, stand your ground," Milt cautioned them with finality, "no matter what breaks. You all set, there, Oliver?"

"All fixed," Constable Oliver assured him from the blaze out on the bed ground. "Can you see it?"

"No, hold her like that," Milt answered. "I'll see what these ranchers say."

He called to the ranchers in turn, starting with Macdonald perched on his buckboard.

"Haven't seen Jack Marlow on the Glengarry, have you, Al?" he inquired.

"No, I haven't, Milt," Al assured him.

Slade turned to Sharples.

"Nor on the Winder, Charlie?"

"Never hair nor hide of Jack," Charlie Sharples reported candidly.

It was Macfarland's turn as the Constable faced him in quick rotation.

"What about the Pioneer, Joe?"

"Jack hasn't shown up there," Macfarland declared quietly, seriously.

Milt had got round to the owner of Bright's Ranch in his probe.

"Same with you, Bright?"

"The very same, Milt."

Except for a couple of minor cattlemen whose holdings were not so extensive and could be overlooked, La Grandeur and North Fork Thibandau were the only ones left.

"No visitors on the Old Man, eh, La Grandeur?" the Constable presumed.

"Not a one," La Grandeur asserted.

Milt grouped Thibandau with them, but he put the usual question just to complete the round.

"Nothing on the Kootenay, is there, North Fork?" he smiled.

"Nothing at all," Thibandau replied. "It's quite a piece from here."

Milt addressed the Peigan chief, North Axe.

"Is Jack Marlow on the Peigan reserve, North Axe?" he demanded.

North Axe would not lie.



"Jack Marlow is not there—altogether, among my Peigan tépees," the chief compromised.

Milt looked at Red Crow, chief of the Bloods.

"You won't prevaricate, either, Red Crow," he chuckled, "so—?"

"Jack Marlow is not on the Blood reserve—when he is not there," Red Crow tied it up.

"I see," nodded Milt. "You mean Jack's ghosting it between the reserves. In that case, I'll have to get your Indian Agent Harry Nash of the Peigan reserve and James Wilson of the Blood reserve to lay the ghost for me."

"You won't have far to look for Nash and Wilson, Milt," put in Court Baker who had moved up behind him to speak to Staff Wylie about the momentarily increasing uneasiness of the cattle. "Here come Harry and Jim now, splitting the wind."

Court pointed at two more familiar riders breaking over the skyline, galloping straight toward them.

"Nash and Wilson, sure as shooting," commented Staff Wylie, without apparent concern.

"Too darn many riders sifting all over the T. N. T. tonight," grumbled Court confidentially. "Maybe we would be wise to start that herd off before something happens, Staff. Start it slow, like. Change their minds."

"Not yet, Court," Staff advised. "Wait a bit. Got to have the owner's ghost in the middle of the drive where it won't be spotted moving over the border. When Milt Slade slides across to search the reserves, we'll start. Ghost'll come along. Cattle'll quiet down."

"Will Milt go?" brooded Court. "Will he act smart

and not search? Will he stay right here, like those three Mounted fellows, Sackett, Baird and Oliver, be planked down beside our torches?"

Nash and Wilson brought the answer with them, tearing down at top speed.

"What's the matter, Nash?" asked the Constable.

"What you two racing each other's heads off for, anyway, Wilson?"

"Gros Ventres," yelled Harry.

"Crows," shouted Jim.

"How many?" Milt questioned them.

"Silver Blade and all his band," Nash reported in ominous estimate.

"Short Leg and his whole bunch," Wilson breathlessly piled up the bad news.

"Who gave them permission to cross the border into Canada?" inquired Milt. "What do they want?"

"Nobody," Nash answered the first part of the query. "Took leave, I guess."

"They came to our houses on the reserves," Wilson replied to the second part, "with a wild story about Jack Marlow going to take back their hunting ground, the old Montana-Marlow Ranch. Said he was hiding on the reserves, and they had to talk to him. Such a cock-and-bull tale!"

"We haven't men enough left to turn them back to the border," Nash continued. "You'll have to do it, Slade. What a tall fable to get out of them about Jack!"

"Not so tall," Milt told them. "Not so wild. Jack is—or, rather, was—hiding there. The Crows and Gros Ventres have laid his ghost. There he is crossing the hills to the T. N. T. limits."

They had one swift glimpse of Jack Marlow's well-known figure rearing over the ridge against the skyline in advance of his ancient enemies, the Crows and the Gros Ventres.

He was riding the buckskin, Biter.

Ahead of him, like another ghost, loose, frightened, ~~plunged the cream-bronc Snowfall~~ which evidently had wandered onto the reserve also.

Behind him came Silver Blade and Short Leg with their bands, riding hard, pressing for that fiery conference with him.

But Jack reached the cattle lanes on the edge of the big, massed herd and vanished into it.

"All right, Court," the loud voice of Staff Wylie called out. "The boys are ready for the drive. You starting now?"

"O.K., off we go," directed Court. "Where's Peter the Greek to look after our chuck wagon? Oh! Coming right along, eh?"

On the farther edge of the herd Peter was riding down, his voice high in another aria, his white restaurant coat discarded for chaps as he took over the waiting chuck wagon and raised his cooking apron as a signal flag on his whipstock.

Immediately the fretting longhorns got their will and went into motion, the T. N. T. riders, the ranchers, the Bloods and the Peigans herding on both flanks and the rear, shutting out the Crows and Gros Ventres from continuing their chase.

"Make the way open," Silver Blade appealed beligerently to the Mounted man. "You hold the law. We will talk with Jack Marlow."

"Yes, we will talk with Man of Three Torches.

with Man Whose Ranches Straddle the Border," declared Short Leg.

"Not here," Milt decreed. "You're off your own territory. Down at Sweet Grass is your place for confabs. And I've a fellow here to conduct you back there again."

Milt waved an arm behind him, signalling the stage coach which Lou Gates was pulling out with Aunt Flo as passenger and Muriel and her mother riding beside. They too had seen the man on the buckskin and the cream bronc Snowfall join the herders.

"Tell Fred Provost he'll have to look after this U. S. bunch, Lou," he requested.

"Sure, Milt, I'll hail him," agreed Lou, promptly relaying the news.

The Sheriff loped up, Commandant Steele, Sergeant Joyce, N. C. O. Roberts with him when they caught sight of the intruding American Indians and the disturbed Nash and Wilson still arguing with Silver Blade and Short Leg.

"Some wards of yours, Fred," grinned Milt. "Strayed out of your nursery. You'd better head them back to Sweet Grass along with the herd. Tell them it's all on the maps down yonder at the Sweet Grass Survey Camp whether the ~~Montana Marlow~~ is their reserve, Great Falls and Canada Railway grant, or Jack Marlow's grazing ground. Chief Lands Surveyor Lockie Hamilton has gone on ahead with Phil Catto and Rupert Tucker to find out. We'll catch them there."

"Yes, Milt, yes, I'll spank them home," grumbled the U. S. Sheriff who had seen Jack Marlow's ghost

himself. "Only, you always seem to make sure I have my greedy hands full when there are any rewards kicking around anxious to be picked up."

He turned from Milt's grin to yell at the leaders of the Grows and the Gros Ventres.

"Cut it out, Silver Blade, Short Leg," Provost thundered. "Come on. Don't you know you've broken bounds again?"

Fred headed them, and with the bands followed the steady, powerful, seemingly irresistible drive of the cattle.

"Do you imagine you'll need any help down there, Constable Slade?" asked Commandant Steele curiously, as accompanied by the Sergeant and the N. C. O. he stopped with Nash and Wilson to watch.

Milt saluted reassuringly.

"I can handle it, sir," he answered.

"All right," Steele agreed. "I'll take Sergeant Joyce and N. C. O. Roberts over with Nash and Wilson to see that everything is quiet on their reserves."

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

FOR three hours Milt Slade, aided by those in charge, took the cattle count through the Customs post on St. Mary's River, and when he brushed the dust of the last tail switch off his red tunic and threw his leg across Deerfoot's saddle at the finish, Court Baker put a hopeful question.

"You not bothering with the man count, Milt?" he asked. "Seeing as it's only a transfer?"

"Not at St. Mary's," Milt replied. "Sweet Grass is the point of entry. So we'll just lope on over and take the man count there. Women count, too."

An enigmatic smile lighted his features while he swung Deerfoot alongside Muriel's Sunup and her mother's chestnut as they all rode down on Sweet Grass. Milt hummed a gay tune in snatches, talking humorously to them every foot of the way.

"You're cheerful, aren't you, Constable Slade?" remarked Alice Marlow, trying to read his smile.

"I always am when my day's work is done, although it's nearly midnight now," Milt explained.

"Do you think Mr. Hamilton will have any news from Ottawa, Milt?" Muriel questioned eagerly.

"Lockie ought to have some kind of word," the Mounted man figured. "There should be an answer to his wire by now."

"Land's sakes, I wonder is it good word?" propounded Aunt Flo, rocking along in the stage coach with Lou Gates behind his prancing blacks.

"Whatever it is, Lockie has it with him, you bet," Milt assured them, "and sure enough, he's there

ahead of us. See those lights? That's the Sweet Grass Survey Camp and the upper border of your old Montana-Marlow Ranch."

Milt pointed to a spatter of lights against the Sweet Grass Hills rolling up in front, tinted a vivid bronze-green in the rise of the prairie moon over the purple Bear's Paw Mountains behind, looming so clear in the starlight that they seemed almost to hang overhead.

While they approached, the glow of light grew brighter, banding the border for their horses' hoofs, and glinting like firelight on the Mounted uniform. Most of the glow issued from the largest tent of the three that stood in a pocket of the hills surrounded by several wooden buildings. At the bellowing of the steers, the rider's clatter, the rumble of buckboard, chuck wagon and stage, the main tent flap flew back and they saw Hamilton, Catto and Tucker outlined in the mellow radiance.

Hamilton's face beamed brighter than the tent lantern and he triumphantly waved a couple of rolled-up surveyor's maps that he held in either hand.

"Beat you to it, folks," he shouted. "Don't faint, anybody. It's really all in your favor, but that's no reason you shouldn't look for yourselves."

He spread the maps, one of the G. F. & C. survey through the border section, one of the Edmonton, Calgary and Macleod survey, in Old Man River Valley before the excited eyes of Alice Marlow, Muriel and Aunt Flo.

"The Montana-Marlow?" cried Alice, hardly able to trust her eyes.

"The Montana-Marlow homestead is outside the G.

F. & C. grants," Hamilton pointed out, "where Montana open range law holds good for you."

Alice's eyes dimmed and her lips quivered so that she could not voice her flooding gratitude in that swift moment of their investigation.

But Muriel's eyes fired exultingly as she leaned over the precious maps.

"The Three Northwest Torchies Ranch?" she nearly shrieked in her anxiety.

"Is incorrectly numbered and falls exempt, so that the T. N. T. homestead is not included in the Canadian Pacific grants, either," Hamilton indicated. "Both tracing errors, I find."

He glanced oddly at Rupert Tucker—it might have been for confirmation.

"Yes, in the tracing," confirmed Tucker.

"It must have happened in the copying of the blueprints," Phil Catto explained. "You can see without straining your vision that our lines were run right, exactly as the instruments gave them."

Phil, too, looked at Rupert Tucker quizzically.

"Yes, in the blueprints," Tucker nodded his hasty and complete agreement.

"And Ottawa, Mr. Hamilton?" ventured Aunt Flo, shaking from head to foot with her voluminous suspense. "Don't tell me old Sir John A. went and spoiled things. You have word, haven't you?"

"Sir John A. Macdonald's reply is here," smiled Hamilton, smacking a lengthy telegram. "His Department of Justice quashed Magistrate Holt's six months verdict, considering all the circumstances. Reduced it to a fine, ten dollars and costs to Jack, for emptying his six-gun in a public place."



A cheer burst skyward from the T. N. T. hands, the Macleod District ranchers, the Bloods, the Peigans, from everybody but the Crows and the Gros Ventres, who started to grumble, with Silver Blade and Short Leg, to Sheriff Fred Provost.

Rupert Tucker took off his bowler hat and beamed his finest friendly smile on the three ladies.

"A double mistake, Muriel, Mrs. Marlow, Aunt Flo," he apologized politely, officially, as if addressing a court. "I might say, a triple mistake. I'm glad it's all rectified."

But Muriel, Mrs. Marlow and Aunt Flo were not looking at Tucker at all.

They were staring at somebody else, for the news had run like a prairie fire through the riders to Jack Marlow himself and Jack madly sprinted from nowhere in the ranks of the cattle herd spreading out fan-wise over the Montana meadows. He raced the buckskin Biter forward, hugging Alice, Muriel and Flo from the saddle.

"Isn't it glorious, Alice?" he whispered. "You, Muriel, Flo, the T. N. T., the M & M all raining right back on me like this?"

"It's a flock of Godsend, Jack," breathed Alice, not ashamed to cry over him in public.

"Miracle-magic, dad," faltered Muriel; "not a thing less than that."

Aunt Flo was really sobbing by the way her stout chest rose and fell.

"You're the darned luckiest brother I ever heard of," she averred. "If your luck only holds a little longer, Jack Marlow—"

Aunt Flo hesitated, peeking round the humped

shoulders of Lou Gates at Constable Slade, fearful of the answer which she knew the Mounted man held to that.

The Constable's face was invested still with its enigmatical smile, but, like Tucker's, it was his friendliest smile, and he held out a friendly hand to Jack across the saddles.

"Congratulations, Jack. No hard feelings, I hope?"

"Thanks, Milt, not a one. And thanks for waiting for Hamilton's good word. Tell me just why you did wait for the Ottawa wire."

"No need for me to stampede things," Milt told him simply. "If the Government's word was O.K., it was out of my hands. So that settles the Three Torch-es Town court charge."

"And you and Jack can still have a bite of lunch together in the Toe Cork Restaurant," observed Court Baker reminiscently.

"Yep," grinned Lou Gates, "and wash your hands in Prairie Rose Soap before you go to bed."

"Well, yes, we can," reflected Milt, "but before another bedtime, there's still the matter of the Overland Express robbery left."

"The what?" blurted Jack.

"The Overland hold-up," Milt enlarged. "You see, Jack, I'm like Mrs. Marlow, Muriel and Aunt Flo. They had faith in you. So had I. They kept one torch, trust, burning for you. So did I. I knew you didn't lift the Coyote Crossing payroll. You wouldn't hear about it yet, ghosting it alone. Better read it now."

Milt gave him Mat Speedwell's *Northwest Star*

which he had shoved into the saddle sheath of his Police carbine.

"Good ghosts alive!" exclaimed Jack at sight of the headlines.

He read on and his face ridged grimly, defiantly, as he looked up again at the Constable.

"So you knew I didn't lift it, Milt?"

"Yes, Jack, absolutely yes."

"How did you know?"

"Because I know the man who did. The same man who held me up on the Great Falls and Canada. The G. F. & C. loot wasn't returned so promptly—you can ask Muriel and Mrs. Marlow about that—"

"Restitution, eh?" cut in Marlow, with an understanding glance at wife and daughter.

"Yes, Jack, exactly, and through Lockie's good offices—better ask him, too. Prompt return, you bet. The G. F. & C. plunder isn't so quick at turning up, as I said, but it will turn up shortly. I know where it happens to be cached."

"Where?" asked Jack flatly.

"On your T. N. T. Ranch," Milt gave the vast and vague location. "Since you've duly taken over the M & M, we'll ride back there and ask some of the T. N. T. riders to dig it up."

"I'll hold the herd O.K. on the Montana-Marlow with a few hands while you dig," Staff Wylie, top rider, offered swiftly.

"No, Staff, you go along to the T. N. T.," Court Baker directed: "I'll watch these cattle."

"You both better be there to oversee the hands uncover the cache," Milt advised Court and Staff. "A

few cowboys can night-herd this outfit on the M & M right here."

Hamilton threw out a word of caution.

"Just a minute, Milt," he begged. "There's a neutral zone on the border, but Phil and I had better give Jack right-of-way across the adjoining limits of the M & M and the T. N. T. while Tucker is present to make it legal. Eh, Rupert?"

"Very good idea," acquiesced Tucker. "Go ahead and survey a pathway common to the two ranches. I'll write an affidavit for the records."

Phil stuck up a picket to get line and Lockie squinted through his instrument. At their sudden move the Crows and Gros Ventres interpreted it as taking complete possession and surged forward in protest, but Sheriff Provost, sitting his horse in front, blocked them back while the line was run. Then Jack Marlow stepped upon it, speaking to Silver Blade and Short Leg, making the peace sign to both their tribes.

"The Bloods and Peigans are my friends," he told them. "North Axe's and Red Crow's bands hunt and fish at will on the T. N. T. I would have you do the same on the M & M. We have fought, but now let us make the peace sign. Let the Crows and the Gros Ventres make the peace sign with the Bloods and the Peigans. Only, you must bring in my lost calves and stray steers carrying the T. N. T. brand which you keep in the Bear's Paw Mountain valleys."

Silver Blade and Short Leg held conference, with the weighty word of the Sheriff helping them to a proper decision.

"It is good," Silver Blade announced. "We shall

bring in the strays."

"And we make the peace sign," Short Leg agreed.

Constable Slade gravely witnessed it.

"You are four wise chiefs," he commended. "Your four tribes have held good council. I shall choose three Bloods, three Peigans as border scouts for the Mounted Police, to watch that the peace is kept. I choose Burnt Hill, Whistling Bird, Flying Cloud of the Peigans, also Dark Sun, Storm Feather, Quick Foot of the Bloods."

The Sheriff nodded his satisfaction.

"Fine," he coincided, "and I'll pick six U. S. scouts to keep an eye on the American side. I take Eagle Wing, White Deer, Mountain Wind of the Crows, and Shining Horn, Black Knife, Brown Bear of the Gros Ventres. Stay here, you scouts. Your bands go to get the strays. I ride to the T. N. T. to see if they dig anything up."

Marlow's few older hands held the herd on the M & M. The Crows and the Gros Ventres rode south into the Bear's Paw valleys. The Bloods and the Peigans turned north with the whites. Only the twelve scouts remained on the boundary, six on each side, guards of the peace sign in Montana meadows.

It was daylight when Lockie Hamilton's big family party got back to the T. N. T., but the news had leaked out when Tucker passed the word for foreman Tom Braddick and his railway gang to pull out the steel link-up and tear down the cattle guards or "cow-catchers" in diversion of the road past the Marlow homestead.

All Three Torches Town swarmed out to make the party bigger. Cal Dover popped from the stage ex-

press office. The station staff, Danny Moss, Art Simms, Charlie Baird and the Morse code operator, sprinted off the train platform. Les Carr came puffing through his realtor's doorway, Mat Speedwell running out of his editor's sanctum, heeled by the newsboys, Izzy and Sol. The hospital staff took brief leave, Orderly Jim Pearce, Nurses Martha Moore and Daisy Luther, Matron Esther Maddox, Doctor Kilgour himself. Toad Foster deserted the Toe Cork Livery Stable, Annette Royale the hotel dining room. Even Commandant Steele, Sergeant Joyce and N. C. Q. Roberts happened along, returning to the Barracks, with the Indian Agents Harry Nash and Jim Wilson, from the now quiet reserves.

The Commandant, sensing a different turn of events, smiled knowingly at his companions as they paused to watch Tom Braddick's men swinging vigorous picks and bars while they tore out ties and rails.

"A right-about face, I guess," deduced Steele.

Constable Slade saluted them proudly, pulling up his brown mustang Deerfoot beside Muriel's Sunup just near the three Police tents screening the three ranch fires, two dormant, one live, in branding corral, open range and bed ground. Constable Sackett, Barr and Oliver saluted also. They had stretched their tarpaulins well. Not a spark had winked from either of the banked ash heaps. Not a flame tongue had licked above the canvas round the third blaze. Only a wisp of smoke rose lazily, unintelligibly, to mingle with the morning's nebulous vapors drifting from the Rockies down over the Livingstone Range tops, the crests of the Porcupine Hills and the last disappear-

ing night mists rising high from the prairie rivers. The torch language the fires had spoken so long and so effectively was silenced, for the moment at least, by Milt, and he nodded briefly to the T. N. T. top rider Staff Wylie.

"It's now up to you, Staff," Milt intimated. "You sent back the Coyote Crossing payroll off the Overland Express mighty quick. Better produce the three mail and express messengers' boxes you took from me on the Great Falls and Canada Railway just as fast."

"You sure I'm your man, Milt?" asked Staff coolly.

The Constable took from his pocket the patrol slip Staff had signed on the T. N. T. and the Toe Gork Restaurant menu card with the pencilled inscription on it, which had come in the Prairie Rose Soap box full of returned money.

"Identical, eh?" Commandant Steele commented.

"Both the same handwriting," Milt showed him.

"Go on and produce, Staff."

Wylie looked impudently at Rupert Tucker.

"I want to hear if there'll be any Overland charge against me before I produce," the top rider balked.

"Then ask Tucker himself," Milt suggested.

"How about it, Tucker?" challenged Staff.

"No charge," announced Tucker swiftly. "The railroad has the money back. So it drops the case."

"I've got to hear about the G. F. & C., too, before I produce," Staff persisted. "Will there be any hold-up charge on that?"

"The G. F. & C. isn't laying any charge after so many years," Tucker sniffed.

"You can ask the Sheriff to make it unanimous, Staff," the Constable cautioned. "It happened on his

side of the boundary. Fred Provost has a warrant for the G. F. & C. hold-up man."

"Yes, the wrong man," put in the U. S. Sheriff disgustedly, without being questioned. "Jack Marlow's name is on it, and it's ten years old. Count me out when Tucker says the G. F. & C. won't press the case."

"All right, someone give Staff a shovel," Milt shouted to the T. N. T. riders.

"One here," offered Peter the Greek, handing it down from his chuck wagon.

The cowboy Tex caught it and extended it to the top rider, but Staff Wylie brushed the shovel aside.

"Cowboys and Mounted men with spurs don't need shovels for this," Staff scoffed.

He walked by the three fires in branding corral, open range and bed ground and hooked his spurs in turn in the links of the smoke-blackened fire chains that were supposed to bind together the foundation rings of flat stones upon which the embers lay.

Out of the fire pits he dragged at the ends of the chains Slade's three brass mail and express messengers' money boxes marked G. F. & C.

"I didn't really steal it," Staff pointed out. "I rather held it in trust, a guarantee, like, till the Montana-Marlow Ranch came back to us. If the M & M hadn't come back, the funds would have stayed here till doomsday's hell-fire burnt up this prairie."

Staff kicked the trio of boxes to knock the ashes off and the brass of each shone strangely clean.

"So here it is," Staff continued. "Not the same money but the same amount. This is the bank. Money rots if you let it lie, or wastes away, or vanishes altogether some dark night. That's why I in-



vested it from time to time for the last ten years."

"Invested it?" exploded his foreman Court Baker.

"What in?" bellowed Lou Gates.

"Big poker games, and lots of other spots in Three Torches Town," shrugged Wylie. "It built the Toe Cork Hotel, Toe Cork Livery Stable, Les Carr's Real Estate Office building, Mat Speedwell's *Northwest Star* newspaper building—a whole string, the biggest hunk of the boom. It's pyramided up to most a million dollars. Rupert Tucker was my investment lawyer, and he registered the deeds. All sound and legal, aren't they, Tucker?"

"Perfectly sound," testified Tucker, "Perfectly legal, too. Everything duly registered."

"And most a million, Rupert?" estimated Staff.

"Close around a million," Tucker corroborated.

"That's O.K. for me," rejoiced Constable Slade.

"I get back my personal bond posted in my G. F. & C. mail clerk days as young Hamilton Slade-Arliss. But there's one thing I haven't figured about Jack."

He stared wonderingly at Muriel's father talking so animatedly with her, Alice and Aunt Flo.

"One thing misled me," Milt admitted. "How did you get to Coyote Crossing, Jack?"

"Just slower transportation, Milt," Jack enlightened him. "Stage, instead of train, passenger."

"Yeh, you dense Mounted man," joked Court Baker, "Jack took Lou's coach line."

"Yep, under my transportation license I can't refuse paid passengers," Lou Gates explained. "Jack bought a ticket. Here's the stub, date and places officially punched by me."

"Oh, that completes the records, then," smiled Milt.

He inserted the ticket stub in his red record book beside the patrol slip and the Toe Cork Lunch menu card.

"So, Staff, you kept the three torches burning for Jack," he mused.

"I couldn't do any fess," replied Staff. "Jack kept them burning ten years for me."

"Flame-ried pals," commended Milt. "Anything more, Jack? I scent a blood-bond somewhere."

"Blood relation, yes," Aunt Flo disclosed.

"Brother-in-law?" Alice went a little farther.

"Mrs. Marlow is a Wylie," Jack acknowledged.

"Well, I hope you, Mrs. Marlow, Aunt Flo and Muriel, keep them burning always for everybody present here on the T. N. T. today," was Milt's friendly suggestion. "Think you can, Muriel?"

"Sure, Milt, everybody," Muriel assured him, meeting tenderly his admiring eyes.

"Including the Mounted?" he chaffed.

"Including the Mounted, of course, Milt," she declared with a laugh.

Milt walked with her to Constable Oliver's live fire on the bed ground and they took a couple of limps to the open range beacon and the branding corral smudge.

Constable Barr deftly built up his blaze on the open range and Constable Sackett fanned high the flame in the branding corral.

Behind the backs of the N. W. M. P. men stooping to their work, Milt slipped an arm round Muriel under the screen of the canvas, but he did not fool

the eagle-eyed Sergeant Joyce, N. C. O. Roberts and Commandant Steele.

"See that, Commandant?" grumbled the Sergeant. "A youngster who's outsolved the whole Force and the U. S. Sheriff into the bargain. You going to lose him like that?"

"Yes," complained N. C. O. Roberts, "he's recovered his personal fortune, and yon girl with the Prairie Rose smile is going to take him away from us."

"Don't worry," Commandant Steele chuckled. "We'll not lose him. Remember, I went East myself and came back with a wife."

"Surely, a beautiful wife," observed Harry Nash.

"She wore a Prairie Rose smile, too," recalled Jim Wilson.

"Exactly," nodded Steele, "and she didn't hurt the Force a bit."

Evidently Milt and Muriel were of the same mind, for Milt hugged her closer and his lips brushed her smooth cheek.

"Three torches, three Northwest Torches burning, Muriel," he spoke softly, "burning for everybody on the T. N. T., but you'll burn them just a little brighter for me, won't you?"

"Yes, Milt, a little brighter," Muriel happily promised.

